

**Is it time
to talk
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INTRODUCTION

In December 2001, the Taliban were ousted from power in Afghanistan by a US invasion, prompted by the group's refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden, the Al-Qaeda mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks on America¹.

Twenty years later, on April 14, 2021, US President Joe Biden declared it was “time to end America’s longest war,” and announced that all remaining American troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan before the 20th anniversary of 9/11².

It was, as Afghanistan’s President Ashraf Ghani said on Aug. 2, 2021, an alarmingly “abrupt” withdrawal, which undermined the country’s government. The Afghan army was unable to keep resurgent Taliban forces at bay³ and, less than two weeks later, Ghani had fled⁴ and the Taliban were back in power⁵.

The US withdrawal was not, however, the end of Western interference in the affairs of Afghanistan. Within days of the Taliban’s return to power, the Biden administration froze an estimated \$9 billion of funds belonging to the nation’s central bank and held in US institutions, including the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. US aid, including \$3 billion a year earmarked for the Afghan military, also stopped, along with aid packages



from other countries and institutions.

The decision, which appeared to be at odds with Biden’s declared commitment to building a “stable future for Afghanistan,” provoked unease even within the US. Mark Weisbrot, co-director of Washington think-tank the Center for Economic and Policy Research, told The Washington Post that “for the US government to seize Afghanistan’s central bank reserves would be a big mistake. It would be telling the Taliban that the US government wants to destroy them and their country’s economy⁶.”

In March 2021, as Washington and

US President Joe Biden announced that the US would exit Afghanistan on Aug. 31, 2021, after a failed 20-year war.
AFP



other parties tried to revive peace talks in Afghanistan, a senior US government official warned that planned cuts in international aid to the country could precipitate a collapse similar to the chaos that followed the end of the Soviet Union's occupation — and funding — in 1989.

“Eighty percent of Afghanistan’s budget is funded by the US and (other) donors,” John Sopko, the US special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, told Reuters.

“If, for whatever reason, the donors keep drawing down funding ... that could bring the sudden demise of the Afghan government as we know it.” Speaking just five months before the Taliban’s return to power, he added: “Even the Taliban recognizes they really need foreign support. Without it, the government falls⁷.”

Now, more than two years after the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan, it is clear that Western sanctions designed to modify the group’s repressive style of government have not only failed to achieve that objective but have also frustrated hopes of rebuilding the nation.

Instead, the financial restraints imposed on the Taliban have set the country back decades, driving it toward a potential economic, political and security catastrophe.

For the sake of the Afghan people, the West

US Army soldiers boarded a C-17 Globemaster III aircraft before leaving for Hamid Karzai International Airport, Afghanistan, in support of Operation Allies Refuge at Ali Al Salem Air Base, Kuwait, on Aug. 13, 2021. AFP

now has a moral obligation to engage with the Taliban as the leaders of Afghanistan.

MYTH AND REALITY

The fact that the US government thinks it can bring the Taliban to heel through sanctions betrays a serious lack of understanding of the group and their motivations. Ask Zabiullah Mujahid, the chief spokesperson for Taliban, whether he fears a complete collapse of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is imminent and the fighter-turned-official is adamant there is no such existential threat.

Those familiar with the Taliban’s modus operandi are aware of their resistance to foreign pressure and their readiness to fight against it as a religious obligation. Despite two decades of engaging with the group, however, when Western coalition partners left Afghanistan in 2021 they still believed the threat of economic sanctions could be used to “moderate” the Taliban’s behavior.

The reality, however, is that the Taliban remain unmoved by such pressure and it is the people of Afghanistan who are affected by it. According to the World Food Programme, more than 15 million of Afghanistan’s population of 41 million face “acute food insecurity.”

The international community, the WFP said, “needs to step up to avert a humanitarian

catastrophe across Afghanistan ... WFP urgently needs \$400 million to help the most vulnerable 7 million people get through winter⁸.”

The International Rescue Committee, which has run emergency relief programs in Afghanistan since 1988, said the country’s already shaky economy was badly hit when the Taliban returned to power in 2021 and “international donors immediately suspended most nonhumanitarian funding and froze billions of dollars in assets.”

Without this funding, the IRC said, “the economy has spiraled downward. Afghans are running out of money while prices of food and medicine are skyrocketing. The country could see near-universal poverty in 2022 with 97 percent of Afghans at risk.” Looming starvation, it added, “could kill more Afghans than the last 20 years of war⁹.”

In her 2022 book “Backfire: How Sanctions Reshape the World Against US Interests,” Agathe Demarais, a senior policy fellow for geoeconomics at the European Council on Foreign Relations, argued that while sanctions “have many selling points” and “are a quick way for the United States to demonstrate resolve and punish bad behavior,” since 1970 they have had a poor record of success. Sanctions, she writes, “can have negative humanitarian consequences and do not deter ... authoritarian regimes¹⁰.”

The world is seeing an example of such humanitarian consequences in Afghanistan, where the effects of sanctions on the state’s ability to function efficiently was highlighted in the aftermath of the 6.3-magnitude earthquake that struck Herat province in western Afghanistan on Oct. 7, 2023, followed by a series of aftershocks.

According to an estimate produced by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and its aid partners, as of Oct. 31 more than 48,000 households had been affected. About 10,000 homes were destroyed and 20,430 severely damaged, leaving more than 150,000 inhabitants classified as “people in need.”

The total number of dead and injured remains uncertain. But in Zindajan district alone, which was the epicenter of the earthquake and the worst-affected area, the UN has reported 1,294 deaths and 1,688 injuries, along with 191 men and 294 women missing. Here, 100 percent of homes were destroyed, along with six schools¹¹.

Due to the poor state of Afghanistan’s economy, compounded by the inability of the Taliban to access the nation’s frozen assets, post-quake reconstruction is at standstill and whatever aid has managed to reach the area, including food, high-energy biscuits, nutritional supplements, emergency shelters, blankets and winter clothing, has been provided by UN agencies and their partner



Afghanistan’s President Ashraf Ghani gestures during a function at the Afghan presidential palace in Kabul on August 4, 2021. AFP

organizations¹². Casualties are believed to be highest among women and children, who were more likely than men to be at home at the time of the earthquake. However, Lina Haideri, an activist in Herat said this should not be assumed to be a consequence of restrictions on women imposed by the Taliban. Women in the region have traditionally lived this way for centuries and, furthermore, the Taliban have allowed female volunteers to travel to areas affected by the earthquake unaccompanied by male chaperones.

A QUESTION OF MORALITY

For decades, the protection of human rights has been central to Western policy on Afghanistan, or at least to the discourse about it. Yet the sanctions imposed on the Taliban government and individual members impact heavily on the rest of the population, through no fault of their own.

Humanitarian aid, of course, has a vital role to play. When the Taliban regained control in 2021, foreign aid accounted for 46 percent of the country’s gross domestic product and 75 percent of public spending was funded by aid money.

This was, however, more of a sticking



The Taliban captured Kabul on Aug. 15, 2021, after the US pulled its troops from Afghanistan. AFP

plaster than a remedy; Afghanistan needs a more permanent solution. Yet the sudden cut in aid and the freezing of the nation's assets threatens to plunge the country into economic catastrophe.

International stakeholders broadly have one of two options when it comes to the Taliban: fight them or work with them — and fighting the Taliban has never yielded favorable outcomes.

It is not hard to see that for Western powers that have spent so much time, blood and money trying and failing to eradicate the Taliban, the prospect of having to come to terms with them doubtless represents a blow to pride and, perhaps, a sense that engagement might be perceived as a betrayal of the trust placed in them by the people of Afghanistan. It is those same people, however, who are suffering the most, and improving their lot demands from the US and its allies a courageous reappraisal of strategies and policy goals.

As Cornell University historian Nicholas Mulder pointed out in his 2022 book “The Economic Weapon: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War,” economic sanctions are effective only when they are lifted in

exchange for realistic concessions from the sanctioned regime, and when they coincide with efforts to engage diplomatically.

In the case of Afghanistan, this is hardly the case. There is next-to-no diplomatic relationship with the Taliban and no known negotiations taking place designed to facilitate the lifting of sanctions¹³.

The political and security landscape has changed dramatically since the Taliban previously came to power in the 1990s, and it behooves the West to respond to the changing circumstances. The moral obligation to save millions of people from hunger and suffering falls especially upon the foreign actors that occupied Afghanistan for more than two decades.

Yet the West continues to peddle financial sanctions against the Taliban as a cure-all mechanism for protecting women's rights and targeting money laundering, drug dealing and terrorism.

Instead of engaging in talks with the Taliban, the US seems to believe that pushing the already struggling Afghan economy over a cliff by shutting down banks is the answer to corruption.

This is an especially dubious position to



Afghan boys and girls, some as young as eight years old, are employed to help earn money for their families, many of whom are refugees who fled three decades of violence in Afghanistan to places like Pakistan but have now returned.
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adopt given the financial scandal that hit the private Kabul Bank in 2010, on the watch of the US-backed government in Afghanistan, as a result of which up to \$1 billion was lost to fraud and embezzlement, and for which no-one has been brought to justice¹⁴.

Under Taliban rule, in contrast, Afghanistan has significantly improved its position on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. In 2012, during the presidency of Hamid Karzai, the perceived level of public-sector corruption in the country scored only 8 out of a possible 100 on a scale in which zero denotes "highly corrupt." By 2022, however, under the Taliban the score had risen to 24. Assessed relative to the other nations on the index, in 2022 Afghanistan ranked 150th out of 180, an improvement of 25 places since 2012¹⁵. The responsibility for meeting the needs of the population falls squarely on the shoulders of the Taliban but providing them with a level playing field to achieve this is crucial. Most importantly, the West must fix what it has broken.

For instance, the infrastructure of the country is in a poor state as a result of the two decades of war. In addition, many people were left unemployed, and the economy took a heavy hit, when the Taliban banned the cultivation of opium, a move viewed as a sop to Western concerns about the global trade in illegal narcotics and a step toward the unfreezing of assets¹⁶.

There are signs that Western think tanks, if not the governments they advise, are edging toward a realization that starving Afghanistan of financial support to punish or pressurize the Taliban is a policy doomed to failure.

In an analysis published in October 2023, the US Institute of Peace concluded that "for the United States, greater engagement with Afghanistan's de facto authorities is the least-bad policy option."

Two years after the fall of Kabul, "there is an increasing sense that Taliban rule is the reality that international actors must deal with — like it or not. Punitive tools, such as sanctions and suspending dialogue in response to egregious policies being announced, have not worked to moderate or reverse restrictions against women and girls. Further, regional states are intensifying their engagement with the Taliban, even signaling that they might break the consensus on nonrecognition that has held thus far¹⁷."

But even recent moves that appeared to pave the way for some of Afghanistan's money to be returned apparently have been bogged down in American domestic politics. In September 2022, the US announced it would transfer \$3.5 billion in Afghan central bank assets to a new, Swiss-based trust fund that would be shielded from



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the Taliban but used to "protect, preserve and make targeted disbursements of that \$3.5 billion to help provide greater stability to the Afghan economy¹⁸."

But it was April 2023 before the money was transferred to the Swiss fund and it has remained there. In July 2023, Reuters reported that "a US-funded audit of Afghanistan's Taliban-run central bank has failed to win Washington's backing for a return of bank assets from a \$3.5 billion Swiss-based trust fund¹⁹... a move that would help ease the country's financial crisis."

The US Treasury said the central bank, Da Afghanistan Bank, must first demonstrate it was free "from political influence and interference²⁰."

There is also the unresolved issue of the remaining \$3.5 billion of Afghanistan's money, which the families of victims of 9/11 are pursuing through the US courts as compensation, on the grounds that the Taliban collaborated with, and offered sanctuary to, Al-Qaeda. In February 2023, a federal judge ruled that "the Taliban — not the former Islamic Republic of Afghanistan or the Afghan people — must pay for the Taliban's liability in the 9/11 attacks²¹."

What will happen to that \$3.5 billion remains uncertain. But ultimately, withholding help from Afghanistan to deny the Taliban legitimacy is a strategy certain to fail, with ramifications for the West.

A weak Taliban means that the country once again could become a safe haven for terrorist groups such as Daesh and Al-Qaeda. To push people into hunger and chaos, and to strip them of hope for the future, is to risk pushing them into the arms of militant groups.

Likewise, a Taliban driven to desperation might not only resume the illicit but profitable trade in narcotics, they could also allow Al-Qaeda more autonomy — and the last time that happened, during the 1990s, it led to 9/11, the aftershocks of which are still felt around the world.

CONCLUSION

Calls to isolate the Taliban, proliferate sanctions and offer support to opposition groups will do nothing to help the people of Afghanistan. For the sake of the vast majority of Afghanistan's population of 40 million people, Western powers must swallow their pride and come to terms with the reality that the Taliban represent the future of the country.

Failure to do so would be catastrophic. History teaches us that peace in Afghanistan often hangs by a thread. The West must engage with a Taliban-led Afghanistan to prevent a worsening humanitarian crisis deteriorating into yet another pointless, disastrous conflict that consumes human lives as fuel.

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