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The Taliban Takeover: Plan Now for the Next Crisis in Afghanistan

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The U.S. already faces a crisis over managing its evacuation from Afghanistan, over how to treat Afghans that aided the U.S. in the war, and over which refugees it should allow to enter the United States. This crisis, however, is only the prelude to a far more serious crisis: How will the Taliban govern and what can be done to protect the nearly 38 to 40 million people that will now remain in Afghanistan under the Taliban's rule.

Humanitarian aid is clearly not the answer. Such aid is necessary, and it can be an important bridge to a more stable future for those caught up in the actual fighting and in the immediate social and economic impact following the collapse of the previous Afghan government. The real challenge, however, is what can be done – if anything – to moderate the way in which the Taliban governs, shapes the Afghan economy, creates a new justice system, and enforces its interpretation of Islamic law and customs. It will be to limit repression, violence, and the tolerance of terrorism and attacks on targets outside Afghanistan.

Here, U.S. leverage is clearly limited. It is the defeated enemy. It is the symbol of the reforms and changes the Taliban rejects. It is not a major trading partner or source of commercial investment, and its definition of human rights and the rule of law is fundamentally different from the values the Taliban has lived by and has shown so far as it takes power. The U.S. also has already shown signs of turning away from any further involvement or challenges in the country. It never proposed any credible peace plan or future options for its involvement in Afghanistan after the first peace agreement in February 2020, and President Biden has rejected “nation building” without mentioning any need to consider how the U.S. will treat – or try to influence the new regime.

There are some forms of negative leverage open to the United States. It can threaten to attack any terrorist groups that launch attacks outside Afghanistan. It can withhold recognition of the new government. It can pressure other states, including Afghanistan's neighbors. It can cut off the aid that funded some 80% of the former government's operations and security efforts. And, it can introduce yet another mix of sanctions to put maximum pressure on whatever power structure emerges out of the Taliban conquest.

These negative options can be useful tools when they are used in moderation and tied to more positive options. So far, however, they have largely failed. Sanctions and “maximum pressure” have hurt much of the population of Iran (80 million) and North Korea (26 million), but they have done nothing to force these regimes to halt their repression and military build-ups or to compromise with the United States. Historically, they have been a way of avoiding difficult states, although generally at the cost of making them more active enemies. They also lead to a U.S. focus on security options and empty rhetoric about legitimacy and human rights with little – if any – benefits for the people of the country.

The alternative is to take a more positive approach, although one that is clearly conditional and has an actual impact on Taliban behavior. One approach is to carefully plan and execute diplomatic recognition. Dialogue alone is highly unlikely to change much, but it does help to produce better understanding even if it only results in small compromises and changes in Taliban behavior – small changes can still help many Afghans. Such relations will need to be conditional and frank. Twenty years of reassuring illusions did not help with a friendly client regime. Glossing over differences

regarding security policy and human rights with the Taliban are more likely to make things worse for the Afghan people than better.

Economic aid is perhaps the most important option, and the Taliban will inherit a failed state in a deep economic crisis. The Ghani government often issued statements and claims with all the right intentions and advanced good plans in outline form, but it was a corrupt, incompetent, and a self-seeking economic disaster.

There are few reliable figures, but the World Bank reports that the poverty rate had zoomed after 2014 and increased by over 50% by 2019 – putting more than half the population below the poverty line. The current data on the economy do not adequately reflect the impact of Covid-19 or the drought, but the CIA World Factbook reports that the trade deficit was nearly a third of the GDP. Far too little has been done to reduce barriers to the private sector's development and the size of the government has been sharply inflated and was dependent on outside aid for 80% of its funds.

The rule of law was only marginally functional, and the government and law enforcement did more to extort than support. A corrupt government and elite disguised the fact that real GDP per capita was some of the lowest in the world (ranking a low 213th out of 228 rated countries). Unemployment, and particularly youth unemployment, could not be measured accurately but were obviously critical problems. Public debt had reached one of the highest percentages of any country (202nd out of 228). Drought and narco-trafficking were critical problems, large amounts of aid were wasted and stolen, and many claims of progress had no real justification.

The Taliban may have governed in the past, but it was forced to seriously govern even at the local District levels for two decades. It has no cadres that have practical experience in dealing with these problems in today's Afghanistan – and this is a very different Afghanistan.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that Afghanistan had a population of only 21.6 million in 2000. Today, 41% of its population is under 14 years and has had far better education for both sexes and will seek far better living standards. It is also increasing at very high levels in spite of war and will rise to 45.5 million by 2030. To the extent that Afghanistan has a modern economic sector, its urban population nearly doubled between 2000 and 2021, and Kabul alone had well over 10% of the entire population before the sudden Taliban conquest began.

No one can be sure what elements of the Taliban will take real power as it consolidates its rule, but all of these factors make it likely that it will quickly learn it needs outside trade and investment, a reasonable degree of international recognition, and substantial aid to deal with the challenges it faces at even a minimal level. A U.S. effort to support an aid plan might well give the U.S. substantial considerable leverage, particularly if the U.S. provides such aid in an international context, and it does not try to impose all of its values.

Such an effort will have to be conditional on the Taliban being willing to compromise in some areas and its agreement to avoid any links to active international terrorism. This may well prove to be impossible, but the U.S. should at least try.

The U.S. should also accept the fact that it too will have to make awkward compromises – some of which will be unpleasant to say the least. The role of women is only one such issue. The future of all Afghan youth and almost all Afghans with modern secular educations is likely to be difficult regardless of gender. The United States does, however, need to be realistic, it needs to accept some such compromises, and it needs to find the best way it can exert some degree of influence in ways that can protect the Afghan people and lead the Taliban to evolve as soon as possible. Treating the

Taliban as an isolated enemy will be a self-fulfilling prophecy. It will ensure that the Taliban not only is hostile but that the end in having the worst possible results for all of the Afghan people.