The New Challenges in Aid to Afghanistan

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No one can dismiss the need to help Americans and other foreigners safely leave Afghanistan and to protect the Afghans who served the U.S. and other allied countries during the war. There also is a need to aid many of the Afghans who have become refugees outside the country and who often require extensive support to adapt to a new culture and economy as well as funds to live on until they can get the jobs they need to survive on their own.

The Afghans who had to leave Afghanistan, however, are only a small portion of the Afghans who need some form of aid and U.S. help. It is time to look at those who still remain in Afghanistan and the country’s deeper problems and needs. The United States needs to start planning now to provide the aid they will need during what may well be a decade long period of transition – and one where the U.S. may be able to persuade the Taliban to modernize and avoid any support of terrorism and extremist movements.

This paper focuses on the challenges in providing such aid. It addresses the scale of Afghanistan’s post-collapse economic crisis, and it examines the critical problems in Afghan governance and economics that must now be addressed. It looks at the uncertainties in the ways in which the Taliban may evolve and govern, and it suggests a number of ways the U.S. could best serve its strategic and humanitarian goals in providing aid.

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Migration and Refugee Aid for Those Who Seek to Leave Afghanistan in the Future

Any effort to assess the needs of the Afghan people who will stay in Afghanistan must be prefaced with the fact that there are hundreds of thousands of Afghans that still want to leave the country. While such numbers are little more than a guesstimate, some 250,000 Afghans who supported the U.S. and other allied governments or that risk Taliban persecution for working in sensitive branches of the Afghan government remained in the country after the evacuation flights ceased.

Even though some 175,000 to 200,000 such Afghans have already been evacuated or have found some way to leave, less than half the Afghans who are broadly recognized as having some right to U.S. and allied support and aid in leaving the country have so far been able to leave. Many may require U.S. aid, either to leave or because they need support in adjusting to living in a different kind of country.

The U.S. will also have to decide what aid – if any – it will provide to women, advocates of democracy and human rights, Shiites, and others who are threatened by the Taliban or any other new Afghan government that emerges out of the initial chaos following the Taliban victory. The U.S. must be careful to define what criteria they must meet for support, what kinds of support will be available, and how they can apply for such aid and entry to the United States.

The size and duration of such additional efforts to migrate are uncertain, and much will depend on how well the Taliban adjusts to the realities of governing and development over the coming months and years as well as on the standards that the U.S. and other countries set for such migration. However, the rush to leave immediately after the collapse of the central government is likely to only be the start of years of legal – and not-so-legal – Afghan efforts to leave the country.

The U.S. will have to place limits on such migration for two reasons. First, there are many in other poor and repressive countries who have equal reasons to leave and an equal case for the limited number of opportunities the U.S. can offer. Second, some of the Afghans seeking to leave the country – particularly former Afghan government officials and Afghan contractors and businessmen that were tied to the government – should have no U.S. aid or entry rights.

One category of such Afghans includes those with links to terrorism or extremism. Another category includes Afghans who are known to be corrupt, linked to drug exports and confidence schemes, and are known to be abusive power brokers. The U.S. and its allies failed miserably to enforce conditionality on the use of aid during the fighting – and to focus on the gross corruption in the Afghan government, military, and business sector.

There is no reason to repeat these mistakes after the collapse. Afghans who failed their country and their people during the war should be forced to live with the consequences on a zero-tolerance basis. They should not be allowed to reside in the U.S., given U.S. citizenship, or allowed to retain it.

Creating Effective Aid Policies for Those Who Remain

The most serious post-collapse challenge to providing aid, however, will be to find ways to help the Afghans who stay. Even if one sets a high estimate for those who face some form of serious security threat or discrimination from the Taliban, the total is likely to be under one million. This is a tiny fraction of the 37 to 38 million Afghans who will remain in the country – and most already have an urgent need for some form of aid.
A “Poisoned Chalice”? The Failures of the Ghani Central Government

There was little to build upon even before the collapse. Afghanistan faced a major economic crisis well before the collapse of the Ghani central government. The pre-collapse reality was that corruption was endemic at every level, and development failed to keep up with population growth. Poverty levels had increased steadily since 2014, and the World Bank had estimated that more than half the population lived below a poverty line of $1 a day by the spring of 2021.¹ Medical services were not able to cope with Covid-19, and the country had the highest rate of infant mortality in the world.² The country had critical food problems, a massive trade deficit, and suffered from uncontrolled hyperurbanization. Moreover, the Afghan government’s domestic revenues could only cover a small portion of government spending.

Economies are shaped by what actually happens, and not by theory, rhetoric, and good intentions. In spite of some grossly exaggerated official claims about success, years of official reports by bodies like the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) make it clear that most development efforts had only marginal impacts and resulted in waste and failed implementation.

Outside development aid suddenly increased between FY2006 and FY2013. Much of the money was wasted on corruption and ineffective efforts, and aid levels crashed to less than a third of their peak levels in FY2013 and then to minimal levels after FY2018 – well before the collapse.³ The end result was a pre-collapse economy that did offer some real progress and benefits, but whose modern sector was grossly over-dependent on direct foreign aid to the civil government and military – plus income from drug exports.

By the time the U.S.-backed government failed and the Taliban “won” in 2021, Covid-19 and a coming drought had already created a crisis in much of the economy. Many government officials, serving police and military, and government contractors were unpaid – triggering the collapse of many businesses and an inability to pay other salaries in urban areas.

By the time major cities began to fall, the banking system ceased to provide reliable services and access to savings. People fled conflict areas, and they often went to areas with aid that had already been used by the existing poor and IDPs. Moreover, a wide range of power brokers and wealthier Afghans with private assets had either left Afghanistan and/or moved their money to safer countries.⁴

The World Bank Estimate of the Post-Collapse Economic Crisis

It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that a World Bank look at the trends in the Afghan economy that came out shortly after the collapse of the central government sounded a grim warning about the need for outside help:⁵

In August the Taliban assumed power in Afghanistan, with immediate repercussions across an economy already facing daunting development challenges. Rapid reduction in international grant support, loss of access to offshore assets, and disruption to international financial linkages are expected to lead to a major economic contraction, increasing poverty and food insecurity, and macroeconomic instability.

Key conditions and challenges

The August political crisis has resulted in an abrupt cessation of most international aid and all international security assistance (security and civilian grant inflows were previously equivalent to 45 percent of GDP, financing 75 percent of public expenditure). Under international sanctions arrangements, Afghanistan has lost access to offshore central bank assets of around US$9 billion (45 percent of GDP), while the capacity of
commercial banks to transact internationally has been substantially curtailed. The financial sector has been hobbled by a shortage of both foreign and domestic currency notes. The combined impacts of rapidly declining grants, loss of access to offshore assets, and financial sector dysfunction are likely to include a sharp contraction of economic activity, inflation or shortages of imported goods, and a severe increase in poverty and hardship.

Beginning in April 2021, Afghanistan experienced a third COVID-19 wave. Infection rates have reached record highs, with less than five percent of the population fully vaccinated. At the same time, severe drought conditions are driving a mounting food security crisis. The UN is now estimating that the total number facing acute food insecurity could increase to 14 million (or more than one-third of the total population).

As a result of recent conflict, an estimated 3.5 million internally displaced persons, 0 percent of whom are women and children, will need humanitarian assistance

Recent developments

Afghanistan’s economic growth was slow up to August 2021, reflecting weak confidence amid a rapidly worsening security situation. In addition, drought conditions negatively affected agricultural production. Output is expected to have contracted sharply since the Taliban takeover due to the combined impacts of a sudden stop in donor and government expenditure, disruptions to trade, and dysfunction of the banking sector.

Inflation accelerated gradually over the first half of 2021. Energy prices increased by 12 percent in the first half of the year in line with global trends. Prices for basic household goods, including food and fuel, increased substantially as the Taliban captured border posts and key transit hubs, disrupting supply chains. Inflation further accelerated following the Taliban takeover, reflecting depreciation, hoarding, and disruptions to international trade.

Government revenues fell short of budgeted levels throughout 2021, reflecting excessively optimistic revenue targets. Since mid-July, revenue performance worsened as the Taliban captured major border crossings. Budget execution faltered in the context of deteriorating security conditions for project implementation (the development budget execution rate was 28.4 percent at end-July, compared to 32.1 percent in 2020, and slowed sharply thereafter). By early August, the Taliban had gained control of customs points accounting for around 57 percent of total customs collections, equivalent to roughly 27 percent of total government revenue collection.

In the Mid-Year Budget Review, government revised down revenue targets by 26 percent and slashed allocations to development projects and other discretionary expenditures by 45 percent (or US$0.5 billion). Limited information is available regarding fiscal performance since the Taliban takeover. The interim Taliban government has resumed centralized customs collections, with daily collections equal to around 50-60 percent of the 2020 average.

The financial sector, already facing important constraints, has been pushed into crisis. Liquidity of both commercial banks and the central bank were substantially eroded in the lead-up to August 15, due to a high volume of cash withdrawals from commercial banks and intensified USD auctions. Banks ceased operating immediately following the Taliban takeover, and since reopening have faced major difficulties in processing international transactions due to central bank regulatory measures to control capital outflows and offshore corresponding banks’ reluctance to engage in transactions given sanctions concerns. Firms and households have been unable to access bank deposits, with strict limits imposed by the central bank on the withdrawal of USD and local currency. Constrained ability to process international transactions has undermined formal sector international trade, with firms unable to transfer funds overseas to pay for imports.

Severe uncertainty and anticipated lower donor inflows placed pressure on the exchange rate through the first half of 2021 with the Afghani depreciating by around four percent against the USD. The central bank responded through increased USD interventions (totaling US$1.2 billion, or around 15 percent over 2020 levels) leading to a slight depletion of international reserves. Money market fragmentation and sporadic Taliban efforts to control rates offered by traders preclude any accurate assessment of exchange rate movements since the Taliban takeover.
The poverty rate for the April-September 2020 period was estimated at 49.5 percent. Poverty is expected to have remained at similar levels over the first half of 2021, with recovery from the COVID-19 crisis impeded by political developments and drought conditions.

**Outlook**

The economic and development outlook is stark. Sharp reductions in international aid are driving a collapse in basic health and education services. The sudden loss of public sector activity will have impacts throughout the economy, especially in the service and construction sectors (which account for 58 percent of GDP). Declining grants combined with a loss of access to foreign exchange is expected to result in a balance of payments crisis, with Afghanistan historically reliant on grant inflows to finance its very large trade deficit (28 percent of GDP in 2020). On the current trajectory, Afghanistan is likely to face depreciation of the Afghani, inflation, and shortages of critical household goods, including food and fuel (around 80 percent of electricity, between 20-40 percent of wheat, and nearly all fuel oil is imported).

A substantial share of the population is expected to move below the poverty line, reflecting negative impacts through employment and price channels. Ten million Afghans are vulnerable to falling into poverty, living with incomes between one and 1.5 times the poverty line (US$0.94 per person per day). The food security situation will also deteriorate, with potential long-term negative impacts given Afghanistan’s young population.

**The Food Crisis Predicated by the IPC**

A post-collapse analysis by the Integrated Food Security Phase Collection (IPC), which was sponsored by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN, is at least as grim. It predicts that 55% of the population will experience a major food crisis by March 2022:

In September and October 2021 (the post-harvest season), nearly 19 million people in Afghanistan experienced high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above), an almost 30% increase from the same season last year (14.5 million people). The main drivers of acute food insecurity include drought and its impacts on crops and livestock, the collapse of public services, a severe economic crisis and increasing food prices. An estimated 6.8 million people in Emergency (IPC Phase 4) and 11.9 million people in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) require urgent action to save their lives, reduce food gaps and protect their livelihoods.

Between November 2021 and March 2022 (the winter lean season), a further deterioration in food security is expected, with the number of people in IPC Phase 3 or above increasing to 22.8 million, a nearly 35% increase from the same season last year (16.9m). Out of 22.8 million people, 14 million will likely be in Crisis (IPC Phase 3) and 8.7 million in Emergency (IPC Phase 4). The number of areas in Emergency is expected to significantly increase in the projection analysis period from 21 to 32 analytical domains.

It is likely that household food access between the end of winter and the following spring season will further deteriorate due to: the continuing La Nina climatic episode bringing below-average winter precipitation for the second consecutive year, the impact of high food prices, sanctions on the de facto authorities, growing unemployment and possibly increased displacement. Reduced incomes, lower international and domestic remittances and continuing obstacles to humanitarian assistance (many related to the financial crisis and limited physical access during the winter period) are expected to contribute to the deterioration of food security.

*The estimated 55% population in IPC Phase 3 or above in the November 2021 – March 2022 projection (lean season) is the highest ever recorded in the country*

**The Post Collapse Crisis and Population Pressure**

Dire as these analyses may seem, they were proving to be all too valid by the end of October 2021. Liquidity was worse than predicted, as was inflation – which was limited largely by the lack of readily available money to pay higher prices. As a result, many in government and the private sector had not been paid for long periods. Unemployment – and a matching failure of small businesses and individual entrepreneurs – was steadily growing.
No one knew how much money had been stolen by departing Afghan officials or taken by the Taliban to pay its own personnel. The government was not functioning at many different levels. The Afghan military and much of the police no longer had jobs or paid positions. This affected many young men and added to the chronic problems in youth unemployment.

Youth unemployment is particularly critical in a country where the U.S. Census Bureau estimates the population is one of the youngest in the world (50% are 19 years of age or younger). While such estimates are highly uncertain in a country that has never had a real census, the Census Bureau estimates that the population has risen from 13.6 million in 1990 to 22.5 million in 2001 to 37.5 million in 2021, and that it will rise again to 45.5 million in 2030 and to 54.4 million in 2040.7

Moreover, future levels of youth unemployment were being driven by the collapse of many schools and educational efforts. They were also being driven by the fact that many of the incoming Taliban fighters were young and had no clear prospects for a shift back into the civil economy. They had educated leaders who had some technical expertise, but many were functional illiterates or semi-literate.

Many of the older Afghans who were left were part of a serious brain drain in one of the worst educated countries in the world – creating future problems that were compounded by the fact that many businessmen operating relatively modern businesses had left, taking any hard currency or assets they had with them. This “brain drain” seems likely to be enhanced by not employing educated women in many areas, not retaining or hiring men in government jobs or areas that do not suit Taliban ideology, and a lack of related educational and job or business opportunities in the more modern sectors of the economy.

**The Uncertain Nature, Duration, and Stability of Taliban Governance**

There is no way to predict how this situation will change in the near future or in the years to come. There is no doubt that the Taliban defeated the U.S.-backed Afghan central government, but there is no clear indication of how well the Taliban can replace it as source of governance. There is no clear indication of whether the Taliban can establish a fully functional government, how well it will govern, how long it will govern, who will lead it, or what its policies will be.

The Taliban has inherited a structure of government that is so weak that the legacy may not be a “poisoned chalice” but is at least a “poisoned paper cup.” Long before its collapse, the Afghan central government was rated by the UN, IMF, World Bank – and virtually every other major source of such ratings – as one of the worst and most corrupt in the world. As a result, the Taliban had no stable base of governance and development to build upon.

At the same time, the Taliban is scarcely prepared to deal with such problems. It has not really governed even in the areas it occupied in any normal sense of “governance” for two decades. The Taliban also only had limited experience in real governance before its defeat following 9/11. The Taliban has concentrated on fighting its way to control most of the country from its rise in the early 1990s to its conquest of Kabul in September 1996. It then focused more on enforcing its ideology and social practices in the areas it occupied than on creating a functional government and economy.

This means that the Taliban must now produce some structure of political unity within the Taliban and some form of coherent and effective governance in what is a far more developed country in
urban areas and a total population that is nearly twice as large – in spite of this inheritance – if it can.

The track record of other such insurgent movements is uncertain at best. Many – if not most – insurgent movements have become unstable, and many have suddenly changed leaders when they came to power. In some cases, post insurgency or coup states have not developed real unity for years – if ever. They have existed in a state of repetitive coups and/or low-level civil war.

In other cases, an authoritarian figure emerges like Stalin, Hitler, Khomeini, or Mao. A “leader” takes over and enforces his own views and decisions. Such a leader may cloak his authoritarianism in ideological rhetoric, but the resulting government and its level of stability and unity is shaped by the equivalent of personal rule. Still, in other cases, a movement sporadically changes leaders and characters for at least several years – and sometimes decades – creating far longer periods of uncertainty and instability.

The Risk that a Failed Taliban Will Fail to Govern a Failed Afghanistan

If the U.S. is to aid the Afghans who remain in Afghanistan, it cannot assume that the Taliban will govern effectively. UN, IMF, and World Bank reporting sound a common warning about optimism in such cases – as do the recent histories of major popular uprisings in even the most repressive countries as well as the failure of the much more modern and reform-oriented new governments that emerged out of the “Arab Spring.”

A majority of all “low income” or “fragile states” have ineffective or failed governments, breed ethnic and sectarian violence, produce extremism or terrorism, and have failed to develop at the rates that will bring them to a middle-income status. Even when popular uprisings succeed, the successors to such governments that seek to create modern forms of governance and development fail because there is too little of a structure of effective, existing politics and governance for them to build upon, and also because they lack the practical experience to translate their political intentions into practical realities.

The Taliban’s regressive ideology also means that it lacks most of the elements of an effective approach to developing an economy as well as to modern politics and governance. If the Taliban is to effectively govern a state as backwards as Afghanistan, it must not only build on a remarkably weak foundation, but it must find ways to modify its reliance on the rigidities of sharia Islamic law and look beyond the goals of anti-colonial Deobandi fundamentalism. It must find ways to, at least, effectively coexist with the political and economic systems of the modern world.

Furthermore, if the Taliban is to get anything like Afghanistan’s past levels of foreign aid, it must adopt a structure of government that looks beyond Pashtun social and cultural practices, and it will need to compromise its militant Islamism in ways that reject violence, extreme repression, and ties to other violent extremist groups like al Qaeda and ISIS-K. The Taliban must also bring together its disparate subleaders and groups of fighters, and it will need to create some kind of coherent national structure of civil government where most of its present fighters either become security forces that serve the leaders of the movement in a police or paramilitary role or shift to the civil sector.

Many ideology-driven insurgent movements – almost all of which have inherited regimes and systems of government that have been far less dependent on outside aid – have failed to meet such tests. Lingering failure has been more the rule than the exception.
U.S. Strategic and Humanitarian Goals in Providing Aid to the Taliban

The United States needs to recognize these realities from the start, and it must shape its aid efforts accordingly. The U.S. also has little incentive to engage in a massive aid to a hostile movement or to attempt another major effort in nation building. It should only provide aid that supports two sets of strategic goals:

- First, provide incentives to the Taliban to actively oppose extremist or terrorist movements.
- Second, improve the life of ordinary Afghans and support humanitarian and political modernization and reform.

For all the reasons listed earlier, meeting these goals will be difficult at best. The U.S. must carefully assess the risks and cost-benefits – and do so while considering the fact that any aid it provides to the Taliban is aid that will not go to U.S.-friendly states and regimes or that could sustain a hostile movement.

There are several ways, however, that the U.S. can increase its chances of success and reduce both cost and risk.

*Make All Aid Conditional and Ruthlessly Enforce These Conditions From the Start*

The U.S. must not repeat the mistakes it made in dealing with the Afghan central government from 2002 to 2021, and to some extent in Iraq. As reporting to Congress by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has suggested, it must set clear conditions for what the aid will actually be used for, for actually providing funds to the Taliban or some successor, and for continuing such aid over time.

The Taliban and various domestic and international aid organizations should understand from the start that the U.S. will not offer or continue aid unless the Taliban acts decisively to halt any international extremist or terrorist activity on its soil. The Taliban and any other successor government must be told clearly and unambiguously that they cannot exploit humanitarian needs to obtain aid in spite of activity by groups like ISIS-K and al Qaeda.

While the U.S. cannot insist on the same levels of administration it will demand for its own efforts, it also should not tolerate serious levels of waste and corruption. Corruption and failure are not sovereign rights, and the U.S. cannot rely on generic anti-corruption efforts, legal action, or empty promises. Such efforts normally fail and tend to either punish those in the anti-corruption effort who take enforcement seriously or result in unpopular or lower ranking officials becoming the scapegoats.

The U.S. must insist that some outside body monitors expenditure, implementation, and effectiveness – and the flow of aid money must be tied to full reporting and enforcement. This means each increment in the flow of aid money must be openly and explicitly tied to agreed standards of reporting and verification or the flow will be halted until officials or officers suspected of serious corruptions and/or ineffectiveness and waste are removed. Moreover, the United States must insist that any international organizations it supports with separate aid funds meet these same standards unless there is a crisis that is so time sensitive that immediate aid is absolutely essential.
Limit the Flow of Aid to Relatively Short and Small Increments and Internationalize the Aid Effort

The U.S. and the Taliban do not have to remain active enemies, but they scarcely are going to be friends. They potentially can cooperate when they have common interests – dealing with threats like ISIS-K or meeting the urgent human needs of the Afghan population – but no amount of aid seems likely to bridge their major differences. Having a third party administer or coordinate the flow and monitoring of aid could serve several useful purposes if an effective mix of lead countries or an international body like the World Bank can be created to be put in charge of the donor efforts and the coordinating, planning, and administration with the Taliban or a successor.

- This would avoid having the U.S. be the arbiter in enforcing conditionality on the Taliban, giving the Taliban or other successor Afghan government the independence they would need.
- At the same time, it would firmly tie the aid that such a body administered to the two goals of reducing the threat from extremism/terrorism and meeting urgent humanitarian needs.
- It would provide a structure for other countries to join the U.S. in providing aid, potentially reducing the cost to the U.S. and any one country, increasing the total flow and effectiveness of aid, and allowing the Taliban to implement one set of standards and procedures for administering aid.

The key challenge would likely be in the need to create a suitable body that would actually perform such functions effectively. The U.S. cannot tolerate repeating the sheer ineffectiveness of United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) as an aid coordinator in Afghanistan or the lack of effective development goals and planning that USAID efforts had in Iraq.

The U.S. would also have to limit such a body to countries it can trust – which would only include its strategic partners in Europe, the MENA region, and Asia. China, Russia, and Pakistan all have different priorities and objectives in Afghanistan. Creating too broad of an international effort would mean creating one the U.S. could not trust or easily work with.

Split the Assessment of the Taliban’s Role in Administering Aid and the Assessment of the Taliban’s Role in Preventing Terrorism and Extremism

Having said this, there should be a clear split between 1. U.S. and allied efforts to assess how well the Taliban/successor government can administer and justify civil aid and 2. U.S. efforts to determine how well the Taliban/successor government is countering the rise of ISIS-K, al Qaeda, and other violent extremist groups. This would allow the international group to focus exclusively on effective civil aid, while allowing the U.S. and its allies to create an equally specialized group to focus on counterterrorism.

Having an international or third country-led body that only deals with aid would avoid creating a body with a mission so broad that there is no clear priority for conditionality and the effective coordination and administration of aid efforts. UNAMA performed a number of useful diplomatic, counternarcotics, casualty assessment, and risk assessment efforts. However, it could never create an effective structure for planning and coordinating aid. Similarly, even within the U.S. government, major problems arose in coordination between the State Department and USAID in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and efforts to create common civil-military plans were a failure. Major aid efforts require dedicated and specialized efforts.
As for dealing with the Taliban’s treatment of extremists and terrorists, the U.S. must make it clear from the start that there will be no U.S. aid if the Taliban does not immediately end any ties to such groups, and the U.S. should persuade as many donors as possible to join it in taking such a position. The firmer the U.S. position is from the start, the better, and this is one “red line” the U.S. should make clear cannot be crossed.

Focus on Real-World Opportunities. Do Not Try to Force “Reform” on the Taliban

At the same time, the U.S. must accept the fact that it cannot use aid to force change or reform on the Taliban. It is all too clear from recent history that aid provides only limited leverage in dealing with regimes with different ideological goals and values. The U.S. must accept the fact that it lost the war, and that it now has limited leverage in dealing with the Taliban.

The U.S. is not going to succeed in using aid – or sanctions on aid – as a means to force changes in the Taliban’s treatment of women or in its other social and religious practices. It may find targets of opportunity over time where aid can help speed reforms the Taliban is already considering or debating, but trying to force human rights and religious reforms from the outside before the Taliban is ready – or at least considering reform and change on its own – may well make things worse for the ordinary Afghan, rather than better.

At the same time, there may be many cases over time where the U.S. can succeed in using aid to influence the Taliban and where the U.S. can encourage financial and governance reform as the Taliban or some successor government comes to see an advantage in making such changes. Working slowly and along the lines where some degree of reform is possible is likely to accomplish far more than setting rigid goals.

Avoid Continuing Dependence on Humanitarian or Emergency Aid

Crisis and “humanitarian” aid to those facing famine and to IDPs and refugees serves a real purpose, but it does not solve the problems that cause such suffering, and it can become a trap that simply prolongs the need for emergency aid without ever addressing the underlying problem. Wherever possible, the U.S. should encourage aid that will address the causes of the problem and not simply the symptoms.

Cautiously Seek to Involve the Taliban/Successor Government in Some Form of Development Planning

Having made this point, any such aid effort should recognize that it is far easier to call for economic development and reform plans than it is to create and implement ones that actually work. At least in the near term, the Taliban may simply not be ready to address such efforts or may attempt to use its ideology as a source of the guidelines for long-term development. Issues like interest rates, the birth rate and population growth, the role of women in the work force, and the need for modern education are just a few examples of potentially sensitive aspects of development.

The fact remains, however, that many of Afghanistan’s current problems are structural, not the result of war, drought, or similar “emergencies.” Putting Afghanistan on a route to meaningful development – and one that considers ethnic, sectarian, and regional differences; distribution of income; and fair access to jobs and investment – does require effective development planning.
Once again, the U.S. cannot force progress. It can, however, encourage it, and creating some neutral international group like the World Bank to offer the Taliban practical development plans and options might help the Taliban look beyond religious goals and focus on longer-term development.

**Be Ready for Coups, Political Shifts, and New Governments within Afghanistan**

The U.S. should be ready to play a long game, one that carefully monitors the stability of the Taliban/successor government. It should not tie aid too much to a given leadership or implementation to the unity or continuity of a particular government. At the same time, the U.S. should focus on making aid serve the goals outlined earlier, and it should distance itself from any efforts to change the structure of the Afghan government. Supporting internally-driven changes and shifts is one thing. Once again, interfering from the outside may well makes things worse for the ordinary Afghan, rather than better.

**Be Cautious about the Role of China, Russia, India, Pakistan, and Local States**

There may well be areas where the U.S. can cooperate in aid with China, Russia, Iran, India, Pakistan, and local states, but broadening aid efforts to include as many states as possible can undermine efforts to make aid conditional. The U.S. can interact with outside efforts to keep the goals in providing aid limited and make aid part of a struggle for influence over Afghanistan.


SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 30-38.

Good daily reporting is available from a wide range of media sources. For a good summary example, see Pamela Constable, “Across Kabul, evidence of Afghanistan’s fast unraveling economy under the Taliban is everywhere,” Washington Post, October 4, 2021.

