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The Future of US-Taliban Relations from a Realist Len

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States must adopt a realist strategy regarding relations with the Taliban government of Afghanistan to advance American security interests in the region. The resurgence of the Taliban as a formidable political force following the failed U.S. invasion of Afghanistan has posed a complex, multifaceted challenge for American policymakers. The current ostracization of the Taliban government from the international scene will further hinder possible influence actors can wield when negotiating with the government. Though intended to pressure the Taliban into reforming, isolation not only hampers the capacity of the international community to influence and hold the Taliban accountable for human rights violations but also exacerbates an ongoing humanitarian crisis. Furthermore, continuing to isolate the Taliban could encourage it to continue harboring terrorist cells on its soil capable of targeting the U.S. homeland while leaving it dependent on rival powers like China and Russia.

President Joe Biden's policy shift has distanced the United States from objectives of nation-building to homeland security concerns, which require to at least some degree a working relationship with the Afghan government. China, in the absence of an active U.S. presence, is undermining strategic American security goals in the state and has taken advantage of Afghanistan's economic and global connectivity potential while prioritizing the prevention of Islamist fundamentalism spillage into Chinese territory. Afghanistan is proving to be of contentious geopolitical value, and the absence of relations with the state may draw it closer to rival powers while hindering effective cooperation on the threat of terrorism to the U.S. homeland.

Leverage is the ideal policy tool in dealing with Afghanistan's security risks and lack of adherence to international norms, specifically through the lifting of sanctions and considering recognition of the government as soft pressure. Normalization of diplomatic relations is not a moral or political endorsement of Taliban actions, rather, it provides a channel for international oversight, influence, and accountability. Afghanistan harbors multiple security and economic concerns that can cause a power vacuum or precipitate a rise in Islamist fundamentalism.

Accordingly, the adoption of a realist strategy is the most effective course of action to neutralize volatile terrorist threats towards the United States through constructive relations with the Taliban government (lessening the space for Asian geopolitical superpowers to create strategic allyship with Afghanistan), create a robust

intelligence infrastructure, and mitigate the risks of Taliban regime collapse that would lead to a bloody power vacuum and continued threats to American homeland security.

The Journey from Allies to Enemies

The modern political and security situation of Afghanistan can be traced back to the Saur Revolution in April of 1978, in which President Muhammad Daoud Khan was overthrown by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The Marxist-Leninist political organization, composed of the People's (Khalq) Party and the Banner Party (Parcham), implemented an autocratic one-party system with the support of the Soviet Union.¹

This new government had little public support and legitimacy due to Afghan opposition to communist ideology and immediately bred insurgency. A notable insurgent group against this government was the mujahadeen, which closely aligned with Islamist ideology. Mujahadeen resistance to the PDPA and internal fighting between Marxist-Leninist factions within the regime caused the Soviets to invade Afghanistan on December 24th.² This invasion, which mobilized over 30,000 Soviet troops, was a widescale failure due to the lack of popular support for their installed government and the inability of Soviet forces to defeat the mujahadeen.³

The success of the mujahadeen can be traced back to extensive American funding for these Islamist forces through the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) Operation Cyclone. The mujahadeen was seen as an effective proxy force to balance communist expansion into Central Asia and counter growing Soviet influence in Asia during the Cold War era. Operation Cyclone was one of the longest and most expensive covert CIA operations ever established, with more than \$20 billion in U.S. funds disbursed to the mujahadeen, according to some estimates.⁴

After the war, the United States welcomed the Islamist administration as rulers of Afghanistan, and prioritized support for the Northern Alliance, an anti-Taliban coalition. Once the Taliban rose to power, they toppled the Northern Alliance through a series of high-level assassinations of political officers. Many security experts discuss this action as a critical juncture regarding Taliban aggression towards the

United States, which would manifest in al-Qaeda's fatwa declaring war against the United States and the subsequent 9/11 attacks.⁵

Operation Enduring Freedom came about after the 9/11 attacks, primarily oriented toward three goals: 1.) the assassination of Osama bin Laden, who was living in asylum provided by the Taliban government, 2.) toppling the Taliban regime, and 3.) eliminating al-Qaeda. After the overthrow of the Taliban from administrative functions and their retreat from Northern Afghanistan, the United States supported the government of President Hamid Karzai with extensive U.S. security aid, troops, and funding.⁶ Over the twenty-year course of the United States' war in Afghanistan, more than 100,000 American troops were deployed, 2,324 personnel were killed in active combat, and \$2.3 trillion in military spending was approved while battling Taliban forces for control of the state.⁷

The U.S.-led coalition ended this combat mission in 2014, handing over the full responsibility of Afghanistan's security apparatus to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). Despite multiple shifts in U.S. military strategy, incremental troop increases, and continued federal financial and logistical support to the ANDSF, the Taliban began to capture major cities and provincial capitals after 2017 while the incumbent Afghan government grew weaker in political and military capabilities.

From Self-Defense to Mission Creep

The goals (and their prioritization) the United States intended to accomplish through this invasion varied at different points in time. Several goals pursued included the elimination of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the removal of the safe haven status granted to Islamist fundamentalist groups upon Afghan soil by strengthening and building formidable Afghan security forces, and the construction of a legitimate and resilient civilian government.⁸ It was believed that if these goals were accomplished, the United States could withdraw from Afghanistan knowing its post-9/11 security goals were established.

The lessons learned from this failed intervention are several. Firstly, there is a lack of consistency in

a coherent vision concerning the security situation of Afghanistan, and what outcomes were feasible. Initially, the invasion of Afghanistan was deemed to be a war of self-defense, intended to be complete after the destruction of al-Qaeda and the assassination of bin Laden. But this subsequently grew to include the defeat of the Taliban, the annihilation of the group from Afghanistan's political fabric, and it extended into the removal of corrupt Afghan political officers who undermined U.S. goals of nation-building.⁹ Combined with a resilient Taliban insurgency that continued to wage war against U.S.-backed Afghan forces and American troops themselves, the United States fueled further funding towards a myriad of reconstruction and security efforts with no certain end goal in sight for over two decades.¹⁰

Regardless of the budget available, the "Afghanistan Project" was not feasible no matter how much money the United States may have thrown at it. Furthermore, the United States severely mistook the amount of time and effort it would take to reconstruct Afghanistan. The naive sense of belief from the American political establishment that it could easily wipe clean the entirety of the Taliban from Afghanistan's political environment, successfully engage in nation-building, and return Afghanistan to order is a product of the American culture of nation-building, in turn making Washington ill-prepared for the negative consequences that come with regime change.

The United States must learn from this costly moment of modern history that any policy aspirations towards the current state of Afghanistan must maintain a clear, coherent, and, more importantly, feasible vision. The assassination of Osama bin Laden and the destruction of al-Qaeda after the 9/11 attack was surely a justifiable cause, but the American foreign policy establishment succumbed to the detrimental consequences of mission creep, and decades of wasted federal funding, U.S. lives, and valuable time that could have been allotted to the prioritization of more imminent international and domestic challenges that were realistically accomplishable.¹¹ Policymakers must keep these policy failures in mind when shaping a new path for U.S.-Afghan relations.

US Interests in Afghanistan

The Doha Agreement, signed in 2020, was an

admission that the United States' Afghanistan strategy failed. Negotiations with the Taliban, begun by President Donald Trump and executed by the subsequent Biden Administration, discussed four objectives. First, is the promise by the Taliban to not allow asylum or harboring of international terrorist groups or individuals upon Afghan soil. Second, was the designated timeline for the withdrawal of U.S.-led coalition forces (full withdrawal was slated for 14 months later). Third, is a commitment to a political settlement and negotiations between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Lastly, is a permanent ceasefire¹². After the signing of this deal, the Taliban heavily increased insurgent attacks upon Afghan security forces and resumed offensive military operations to topple the government. During 2020 and 2021, the United States slowly decreased stationed troops and offensive support to Afghan forces, with the Taliban finally taking Kabul in August 2021, bringing the country under their rule.¹³

A pivotal U.S. objective in the post-Taliban takeover of Afghanistan is the prevention of the usage of Afghan soil by transnational terrorist organizations that may use the territory and Taliban asylum to plot attacks against the U.S. homeland and U.S. allies.¹⁴ The lack of adherence the Taliban hold towards this portion of the Doha Agreement takes precedence over all other U.S. interests in the state. This is manifested in the proven harboring of al-Qaeda members by the Taliban government, such as the protection of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the main leader of al-Qaeda.¹⁵

Additional interests in the U.S.-Afghan agenda are inclusive governance for women and the protection of human rights, as well as addressing the current humanitarian/economic crisis. A crumbling Afghan economy and the threat of regime overthrow by anti-Taliban insurgency forces (notably the Islamic State-Khorasan Province, or ISIS-K) is a large concern for U.S. policymakers, as this could divide the territory into more power vacuums, possibly bringing into power a more radical terrorist regime.¹⁶

Behind Enemy Lines: Security Threats and Vulnerabilities for the Taliban

The threat environment in Afghanistan is composed of two broad categories of terrorist groups: those

opposed to the Taliban rule and others allied with the regime. Understanding this security landscape is crucial for weighing the merits of Taliban security coordination with the United States, and how this may secure U.S. national security objectives. Taliban allies are Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), al-Qaeda, and several Central Asian jihadist organizations. The main enemy of the Taliban is ISIS-K.¹⁷

During the first year of Taliban rule, al-Qaeda raised activity and communication among its terrorist cells, inciting violence against embassies across the world (such as Sweden and Denmark). The asylum granted to al-Qaeda leader Zawahiri points to the positive relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Despite this, a declassified intelligence report by the National Intelligence Council that discusses the prospects for al-Qaeda through 2024 mentions their incapability of targeting the U.S. homeland. Two key judgments the report proposed for the future of al-Qaeda's existence in Afghanistan are 1.) "Al-Qaida [sic] will probably prioritize preserving its safe haven over conducting operational activity in Afghanistan and is unlikely to reconstitute the capability to direct external operations from the country through 2024; it has little infrastructure in place in Afghanistan."¹⁸ The report further mentions al-Qaeda is wary of jeopardizing its safe haven status in Afghanistan through attacks upon the Western world.

A second key judgment is that the threat al-Qaeda poses to the international scene is dependent on the actions the Taliban allows from the organization, stating, "The Taliban's will and capability to restrict al-Qaeda will be the primary factor that determines the threat emanating from Afghanistan". al-Qaeda is at the bequest of the Taliban to receive refuge they may not have access to elsewhere in the world, and the precarious position the Taliban are in internationally means they may be curbing al-Qaeda activity to reduce the chances of another Western intervention, more crippling sanctions, and further ostracization from the international scene. Even President Biden stated this in response to a reporter asking him to admit current Afghan policy failures, "Do you remember what I said about Afghanistan? I said al-Qaeda would not be there. I said it wouldn't be there. I said we'd get help from the Taliban."¹⁹

Taliban policy towards internal militant allies has three facets: enablement, restrictions, and

crackdown.²⁰ The Taliban allows various militant groups safe haven within the state and even grants welfare payments and weaponry access, but this comes at a cost. As indicated by declassified U.S. intelligence reports and leaked messaging from al-Qaeda leaders, the Taliban provides these benefits under the assumption of militant activity restrictions such as requests that al-Qaeda not commit attacks against the United States and its allies.²¹ While al-Qaeda remains a fellow traveler of the Taliban, the restriction the Taliban poses upon its activity is an important development to note and can be an element of potential U.S. strategy for curbing al-Qaeda activity.

One common security objective between the United States and the Taliban is the defeat of ISIS-K, whose professed goal is to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate in replacement of Taliban rule. ISIS-K, a much more violent and fundamentalist organization compared to the Taliban, has consistently attempted to topple the regime (raising fears from U.S. policymakers of an imminent power vacuum). The branch commits insurgency attacks while exploiting the poor economic conditions of Afghanistan, promoting sectarian violence, and discrediting neighboring country's governments. Additionally, it has pledged to attack the U.S. homeland, granting this organization as a common enemy between the Taliban and the United States.²²

Ostracization of Afghanistan from the International Scene

Do We Negotiate with Terrorists?

Domestic opposition to collaboration with the Taliban is grounded in several reasons. One is the granting of legitimacy to an organization that provided safe haven for terrorists, refused to hand over Osama bin Laden to U.S. forces after 9/11, refuses to practice inclusive governance towards women and minorities, and is deemed untrustworthy due to its lack of adherence to the Doha Agreement. But, after two consistent years of Taliban rule and the inability of the regime to fall to internal forces, the world may have no choice but to work with this government. The continued ostracization of the Afghanistan government from the international scene will reduce the soft power America may be able to wield when curbing unwanted activity

from the government, while additionally hardening the Taliban's attitudes towards international cooperation on broad humanitarian goals such as counterterrorism operations and minority rights. The continued lack of inclusion, immense sanctions, and international isolation hinders broad U.S. goals with the state.

Acknowledging the political realities of Afghanistan is essential to understanding why a restraint-minded perspective toward the state is needed. The Taliban is the single and only partner global governments can access when attempting to solve the security and human rights issues on Afghanistan's soil. While the current Taliban administration is weak with widescale governance issues and attacks from insurgent groups such as ISIS-K, it has yet to be toppled and has greater legitimacy and power (in the eyes of Afghan citizens) compared to the previous government. Policymakers must place a strategic and pragmatic policy mindset above ideological and moral sentiments in order to solve the complicated dilemma the Taliban poses to its citizens, and to the world. This starts with an acknowledgment of the power and influence they wield on Afghanistan's political landscape.

Isolation and Radicalization

The ostracization of the Taliban by international organizations and other governments prevents the reintegration of Afghanistan into the international community, hindering much-needed economic development, and removing opportunities for its citizens to truly thrive under this new regime. Furthermore, completely isolating the government can entirely limit the international community's ability to influence Taliban behavior. Maintaining diplomatic channels can offer an opportunity for the Taliban to participate in a global dialogue concerning international norms and participate constructively, even if their actions are frequently subjected to diplomatic condemnation.²³ The Taliban is no longer a non-state actor and has achieved its objective of becoming a sovereign state, and thus should be subjected to this new status along with its hindrances and allowances.

Continuing to support the Taliban's isolation is a threat to the regional stability of Central Asia. Afghanistan's geographic placement is a crucial factor in Central Asian security, and a lack of effort to bring Afghanistan into the international scene can breed further radicalization of its citizens and

Taliban governance. Unsuccessful efforts to pressure the Taliban through extensive sanctions affords the Taliban an easy bogeyman, as it can blame its economic and political troubles on the United States and its allies instead of reforming. At the same time, the Taliban's continued isolation may well incentivize it to continue infringing upon minority rights, assisting and harboring al-Qaeda, and seeking partnerships with states like Russia and China. Engagement with the Taliban is a pragmatic approach and allows an effective platform for realistic future dialogue to take place between both states that can promote reform, peace, and security.

Many of the goals the United States and the international community hold towards a post-invasion Afghanistan relate to security threats by Islamist fundamentalist insurgency forces and drug trafficking. These threats can only be effectively removed with Taliban coordination. Engagement can provide solid ground for current and future security collaboration. All of these policy recommendations are built upon the framework of inclusive diplomacy, such as engagement with the Taliban, while simultaneously holding them accountable for human rights, international norms, and economic incentives for adherence. The Taliban's lack of adherence to the Doha Agreement is built upon a lack of trust towards the United States and the international community and wasted years of nation construction.

Additionally, though the United States and its allies may be of one mind on isolating the Taliban, other parties are more willing to engage with them, undermining the effectiveness of those measures while deepening Afghanistan's dependence on American rivals. Due to the crippling sanctions and ostracization the Afghanistan government faces, the Taliban have been very open to trade ties and security collaboration with states such as China and Russia.²⁴

Normalization of Relations

Grounds for negotiations and collaboration are virtually nonexistent without the recognition of the Taliban government. This is due to the lack of guarantees a frustrated Taliban provides for their promises. Currently, only three countries (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) have recognized the Taliban regime as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. This request has been

echoed by the regime since its rise and has been staunchly dismissed by the United States, which does not want to recognize a government that came to power through force while not allowing inclusive governance. However, policymakers must accept that this entity can operate on behalf of Afghanistan's people and may exercise its obligations and rights as a sovereign state. The Biden Administration has been offering the prospects of recognition to shape the Taliban's behavior, but even if the Taliban shows considerable improvement in state behavior, the domestic backlash from recognizing the Taliban may be one the current (or any future) U.S. president would not desire to shoulder.

There is little diplomatic leeway to interact with a government legally that does not involve recognition. The United States may find itself recognizing the Taliban government uncomfortably, even if domestic pressure states otherwise. An example is Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, after which the U.S. government refused to recognize the new Islamist regime. Soon after, the United States tacitly did during the 1981 Algiers Accords to free U.S. hostages, while dealing with cases at a claims tribunal to resolve disputes with the Iranian government. Another example is President Donald Trump's refusal to recognize President Nicolas Maduro as Venezuela's legitimate leader. The United States recognized the opposition leader, Juan Guaido as interim president, and granted him access to Venezuelan embassies and government bank accounts. Despite this, the United States was forced to come to terms with the Maduro regime as it was the entity in control of Venezuelan territory, and due to states such as Russia and China continuing diplomatic relations with its government.

Currently, Afghanistan's seat at the United Nations (UN) is held by the ambassador of the previous administration. Despite this, the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, has had several bilateral meetings with the Taliban concerning human rights adherence. While the Taliban shows a lack of will nor desire to comply with UN resolutions or the UN Declaration of Human Rights, this should make more compelling the argument for their attendance at the UN. Afghanistan is not properly represented by the previous government in the UN, as this individual has no ties nor power channel to the current regime. The involvement of the Taliban regime in international fora is crucial for their exposure to international norms.

During the Security Council's meeting in December of 2023, Roza Isakovna Otunbayeva, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan and the Head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan stated direct engagement with Taliban authorities can lead to meaningful change, citing UNAMA's successful meetings concerning issues such as human rights, inclusive governance, and counter-narcotic strategy. She mentioned, "Many of the de facto authorities are open to further engagement with UNAMA and to seek an awareness of human rights standards. Dialogue does not legitimize."²⁵

Governmental recognition does not require the normalization of relations, nor is it a moral and political endorsement of Taliban actions.²⁶ Rather, this would allow the regime to be recognized and held accountable by international law. Recognition would allow sufficient grounds for the United States to effectively negotiate with the Taliban and encourage important reforms, such as relaxing restrictions on women's rights, and being stricter on al-Qaeda movement and asylum granting. For effective negotiations and adherence to occur, a concession such as recognition may need to be given for a solid foundation of Taliban promises to arise. The Taliban, superficially, have agreed to many U.S. and global requests regarding security and humanitarian concerns, but have refused to carry out such promises. Due to the weak state of their governance and legitimacy, the Taliban have been using al-Qaeda allyship as a crutch, and Islamist authoritarian rule to wield power and fear upon Afghan citizens during a weak and unstable period of governance.

Conditions for recognition must be feasible for the Taliban government to enact. For example, the immediate granting of full rights to women and the exile of groups such as al-Qaeda may be too extreme of a political departure for the regime, but requiring the allowance of women to participate as part of the labor force (in an increased capacity) and the continuance of Taliban shunning of al-Qaeda plots against the Western world is a realistic place to start. The frequent requests of the Taliban government for recognition demonstrate their political goal of inclusion into the international scene is pivotal despite severe ostracization and is a demand America must consider rationally for realistic outcomes. If seeking international recognition (and the benefits that come with it in the form of economic and humanitarian

aid and a UN seat) is a core part of their agenda, policymakers must learn to leverage this request in a different manner that results in actionable governance change from the Taliban. While the United States will continue engagement with Afghanistan and coordination on counterterrorism, there are not sufficient guarantees from the Taliban they will adhere to U.S. requests for effective security coordination in the long term. Recognition is a reasonable place to start and an effective form of leverage that is built upon realistic expectations for the Islamist authoritarian government.

Utilize Economic and Political Leverage to Advance Shared Interests

The dismal state of the Afghan economy offers an opportunity for Washington and its multilateral partners to offer humanitarian and economic aid, as well as sanctions relief, in exchange for credible commitments to follow through on containing al-Qaeda and sociopolitical reforms. The current Afghan economy is on the brink of collapse, shrinking by 25% over the past two years of Taliban rule.²⁷ Some stabilization from inflows of humanitarian aid has allowed households to meet basic food and shelter. But the economy remains incredibly fragile as the nation tries to rebuild following two decades of war. Afghan unemployment has doubled, the trade deficit has risen, and businesses struggle to operate at full capacity due to a constricted financial system and a vulnerable banking system.

The banking system and currency reserves the Taliban inherited from the previous Afghan administration are frozen, amidst discussion from the American political establishment concerning the ethics of allowing Taliban access to such reserves. For example, the Biden Administration utilized emergency powers to freeze \$7 billion of Afghan central bank assets available at the Federal Reserve Bank in New York, voicing the motive to split the amount between the 9/11 victims' families as legal settlements, and as a trust to fund vital Afghanistan development after the Taliban takeover.²⁸ Deeming Taliban access to the proposed "Afghan Fund" as a non-negotiable refusal, the Biden Administration has little means to recapitalize the failing economy without the assets falling into Taliban hands, further delaying an Afghanistan economic recovery despite potential bank

reserves available for the nation. The economy is currently at a low macroeconomic equilibrium, which the current decline of humanitarian assistance may destroy.²⁹

The United States can adopt soft pressure on the Taliban by wielding recognition of the state as an urge toward many of the comprehensive humanitarian and security reforms that are in the interests of Washington and its allies. Importantly, the Taliban has shown a willingness to work with the United States in return for sanctions relief. The vulnerable state of the Afghan economy allows for an opening of economic leverage as an effective tool.³⁰

Power of Economic Tools in Counterterrorism Agendas

Currently, the Taliban is working with the United States government in counterterrorism coordination against common enemies such as ISIS-K. The degree and depth of such coordination are unknown, and it is clear any security guarantees granted by the Taliban may not be realized. An example is the lack of adherence to the Doha Agreement and the frequent lies by the regime that they are not providing safe harbor to al-Qaeda members or transnational terrorist organizations.

The decrease of foreign aid by the United States towards the Taliban, while attempting to coordinate security intelligence, is counterintuitive. Cooperation with a radical regime underpinned by anti-Western sentiments is far from a guarantee, and Washington will only gain the benefits it seeks if it is willing to make compromises itself and emphasize shared interests. The economic recovery of Afghanistan, while not a primary objective of U.S.-Afghan strategy, is part of American security interests in the region.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced the Stabilization Pledge Drive which similarly argues the power economic tools hold in counterterrorism agendas. The Stabilization Pledge Drive is an economic tool to counter radicalization and ensure the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria and is built upon the argument that dire economic conditions and poor humanitarian conditions ensure the longevity of Islamist fundamentalism, thus maintaining an environment for radicalization of ISIS recruits.³¹ While the United States should not mimic the extensive

funding and economic support given to the previous Afghanistan government, the decline in humanitarian aid and increase in sanctions is counterintuitive to the security relationship it is attempting to build with the Taliban, and the Afghanistan it seeks to realize over the next several decades.

Sanctions and aid cuts are well-intended tools to ensure responsible behavior from the regime through hard pressure but have shown not to produce the policy results America expected, such as adherence to the Doha Agreement, lifting of restrictions upon women, and fair governance. This hard-pressure approach pushes the Taliban regime into seeking trade ties with fellow competitors and authoritarian states such as Russia and China to alleviate the economic conditions they face, which is not encouraging for the future Afghanistan the democratic world may hope to see.³²

American Intelligence Infrastructure Needs a Partner

The prior policy suggestions are integral to the ultimate goal the United States holds in Afghanistan; the elimination of all terrorist organizations that pose a current or future threat to U.S. homeland security. Additionally, U.S.-Taliban coordination should be increased from current levels and hold support as a pragmatic strategy to effectively achieve counterterrorism goals.

The United States needs a partner force on the ground to successfully curb the growing threat of ISIS-K, which is thriving under the dire economic conditions that make radicalization easier for Afghan citizens to engage in insurgency.³³ The weak state of the current Taliban government provides few services and has little jurisdictional power outside of major capitals such as Kabul, creating a weak security apparatus during a vulnerable time of the regime's existence.

When analyzing the current security environment in Afghanistan, a major issue the United States faces is the current lack of partner forces, intelligence infrastructure, and bases to conduct counterintelligence operations.³⁴ Partnering with Taliban forces in intelligence collaboration can provide benefits for both sides. The Taliban will be granted more resources to monitor insurgent threats and the United States effectively will be granted an on-

the-ground partner, providing it with a comprehensive intelligence structure in an area of concern for U.S. counterterrorism interests. This policy perspective will craft a new path for the United States to view active security threats that do not involve immediate boots on the ground or invasion.

Working with the Taliban against ISIS-K would have to include a replenishment of economic and humanitarian assistance in return for efficient security coordination. A second option is establishing a counterterrorism relationship with the Taliban, but not allowing sanctions relief nor an increase in humanitarian aid, while allowing them to unilaterally deal with the problem under hard pressure from the international scene.³⁵ The second option is questionable regarding its success and is the current strategy the Biden Administration is using. The lack of territorial control the Taliban wields outside of urban centers, and its weak capabilities allow the threat of ISIS-K to gain strength and expand operations into neighboring countries such as Pakistan. While the Taliban has consistently conducted counterinsurgency campaigns with ISIS-K with varying levels of success, the regime is in no state to effectively eradicate the group for good.

To make this counterterrorism model more effective, key partners in this battle such as Pakistan must be brought into U.S.-Taliban dialogue. Similarly to the United States, the Pakistani government has been navigating its newly found relationship with the Taliban government with the utmost frustration regarding Kabul's harboring of Tehreek-E-Taliban, which has successfully carried out deadly terrorist plots in the Western portion of the region for several years.³⁶

Consequences of the de-Americanization of Security in Afghanistan

The de-Americanization of security efforts in Afghanistan and the absence of constructive relations with the Taliban has created a diplomatic power vacuum, with most notably China and Russia striving to fill it. China's first motivation is security-related, attempting to control the spillage of Islamist militancy into its territory to combat the East Turkestan Islamic Movement from liberating Xinjiang Province. China considers this relationship a necessity and thus

employs economic tools and regional connectivity to align interests with the weak Taliban government.

More than 80% of the previous Afghan government's budget consisted of foreign aid contributions, and this support additionally accounts for 40% of Afghanistan's GDP. The majority of this aid was given by the United States and subsequently taken away after the collapse of the previous government while blocking Taliban access to its \$9 billion currency reserves.³⁷ This creates a strong need for the Taliban to curate an immediate and resilient trade relationship with China. China is employing a similar regional connectivity strategy as its OBOR, One Belt One Road Initiative.³⁸ This strategy has been largely successful, "buying" allyship of vulnerable developing states to build a robust Chinese influence across Asia. Chinese efforts are focused on stabilizing Afghanistan's security apparatus in order to make infrastructure investments less risky. Pakistan is supportive of such relations, as it holds potential for the future stabilization of the Taliban regime through foreign direct investment and decreases the chances of regime collapse.

Eastern Aspirations for a New Afghanistan

Similarly, Russia expresses aspirations to create robust trade ties with Afghanistan. This is a strategy to mitigate the negative economic effects of Western sanctions upon the government of President Vladimir Putin. Potential infrastructure projects such as the Trans-Afghan Railway and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Gas Pipeline have been proposed.³⁹ But, again, the stabilization of Afghanistan's security environment must be established first before lengthy infrastructure projects can begin. This incentivizes Russia and China to play primary powers in security talks with the Taliban government, effectively filling the gap left by the U.S. It is clear then that attempting to isolate the Taliban through sanctions and non-recognition has not actually isolated it. Rather, it pushes the regime to look for funds and regional connectivity with powers such as Russia and China, who are utilizing such strategies for opportunistic security and trade advantages.

This is dangerous for multiple reasons. Firstly, close ties between the Taliban, Russia, and China can undermine and exclude U.S. economic partnerships

in the region, such as limiting American access to key markets and resources. Furthermore, if collaborative efforts between the three regimes continue, this would further Russia and China's geopolitical influence on a geopolitical region important to U.S. homeland security. Policymakers must not prioritize ideological and emotional sentiments over the practicality of consolidating relations with the Taliban, as it opens a space for other powers to take advantage of American absence. If Russia and China are successful in growing their trade ties, this can make U.S. influence towards the Taliban regime substantially weaker.

Conclusion

The United States must embody realism in its strategy toward Taliban relations. Afghanistan's relations with the U.S. must not be marked by military interventionism and a diplomatic strategy of isolation but with a myriad of diplomatic and economic tools to advance United States interests. The United States must get habituated to striking a middle ground when handling unpredictable governments that does not resort to regime change while struggling to pick up the political pieces in the aftermath.

The Biden Administration's current strategy of ostracization does not accomplish U.S. goals, nor advance the country closer to them. By utilizing economic aid and recognition as leverage, strategically offering sanctions relief, and deepening intelligence cooperation with the Taliban in line with an over-the-horizon strategy, the United States can build a strong foundation for future Taliban negotiations and in the long run perhaps moderate the regime. The de-Americanization of the presence in Afghanistan has allowed space for Russia and China to take advantage of Afghanistan's geopolitical potential and Washington's absence. Without an immediate change in direction, the chances of eliminating security threats from Afghanistan dwindle, and the United States may find itself pushed into another disastrous war on terror.

Endnotes

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