

From Realpolitik to Real Politics: Spiralling Humanitarian Catastrophe in Afghanistan

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Summary

The geopolitics in and of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan has revealed both the insolence and incompetence of the international state system in which human security continues to rank much below the more traditional understanding of security. This is not to suggest that these challenges and threats are inherently problematic or wrong. That said, the framing of such issues as the centrepiece of the global agenda often comes at the cost of ignoring the tragedies that befall human survival, both in times of conflict and peace. Right now, what is needed is momentum around concrete humanitarian action that can salvage whatever little remains of Afghanistan's socio-economic and political system. For a country that has been ravaged by war for more than 40 years, it is incumbent upon the international community's collective consciousness to rescue Afghanistan from realpolitik and focus on its worrying reality instead.

Introduction

In a scene straight out of a post-apocalyptic, dystopian novel, hundreds of Afghans have found themselves fighting with one another to gain access to the basic necessities of life, including food. The haphazard gathering of so many Afghans – some with missing limbs, and almost all in tattered clothes – presents the grim reality of this country in all its brazen brutality. Yet, despite the intensity of the humanitarian crisis brewing in Afghanistan, the world has turned a blind eye to a country that had hitherto been an arena of its successive 'Great Games'. Ever since the Taliban took over the reins of Afghanistan in August 2021, the global major powers appear to have accepted their failures as a *fait accompli*. But while they may have reconciled with their inability to transform this war-ravaged country into a post-conflict democratic state, their supposed humility offers little respite to the millions of Afghans who are currently stuck in a vortex of financial and political troubles.

The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan has exposed both the indifference and inability of the international state system to prioritise human security over more traditional geopolitical interests.¹ Tilted towards a militaristic approach, such a version of security has mostly dismissed existential issues of hunger, malnutrition, infirmities and the like in favour of what might be described as realist challenges to a nation's security, such as war, and other supposedly more urgent non-traditional security threats like radicalism and extremism. The intention here is not to dismiss these challenges and threats entirely. They are not inherently wrong or problematic. That said, it is critical to problematise the primacy they

¹ Graeme Smith, "Stop Starving Afghanistan." *Foreign Affairs*, 29 December 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-12-29/stop-starving-afghanistan>.

enjoy in the global arena to the extent that they come to diminish the more basic threats to human survival that befall us both in times of conflict and peace.

Under these circumstances, it becomes critical to change the international discourse regarding Afghanistan by recognising the ongoing, implosive humanitarian crisis in the country as a legitimate threat to not only Afghanistan's national security but also that of the South Asian region at large.

A Flailing Afghanistan

The modern-day state of Afghanistan is certainly not a sight to behold. Far from it, despite the Taliban's concerted effort at promoting a more benign image, the political system in Afghanistan has all but collapsed, with its economy in a tailspin that is most likely to have disastrous consequences for human security. At the same time, the growing evidence of reprisals, crackdowns and persecution of members of Afghan civil society and the individuals associated with the previous Afghan government have only reinforced the reluctance of countries across the world to associate themselves with the Taliban.²

Under its so-called interim regime, the Taliban has done little to rescue the deteriorating economic and social conditions in Afghanistan because of its limited capacity to govern³ and international sanctions that have plugged the country out of global financial flows.⁴ With more than US\$9 billion (roughly S\$12.2 billion) of Afghanistan's currency reserves frozen by the United States (US) President Joe Biden's administration, the American reluctance to unfreeze these holdings has had an adverse impact on the Afghan economy, notwithstanding the legitimate reasons that may have effected these sanctions into action. The abysmal track record of the Taliban on matters such as women's rights, rights of ethnic minorities and the like has been reinforced by its political actions. For instance, the replacement of the Ministry of Women's Affairs with the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice demonstrates how sexism continues to pervade the group's ideology and practices, despite assurances to the contrary.⁵ Similarly, the sheer lack of ethnic diversity within the Taliban's current political cabinet highlights the ethno-centricism of this group, which is unlikely to help win allies both within Afghanistan and beyond.

The militant composition of its interim government, with many proscribed individuals and organisations such as Sirajuddin Haqqani of the notorious Haqqani network forming the backbone of the interim government run by the Taliban, is another source of regional worry.⁶ It comes as little surprise that countries in South and Central Asia – regions in which

² International Crisis Group, "Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe", 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/317-afghanistans-humanitarian-catastrophe.pdf>.

³ International Crisis Group, "Taliban Rule Begins in Afghanistan", 2022,

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/taliban-rule-begins-afghanistan>.

⁴ International Crisis Group, "Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe", op. cit.

⁵ Al Jazeera, "Taliban Replaces Ministry For Women With 'Guidance' Ministry", 18 September 2021,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/18/taliban-replace-ministry-for-women-with-guidance-ministry>.

⁶ Bill Roggio and Thomas Joscelyn, "Taliban's Government Includes Designated Terrorists, Ex-Guantanamo Detainees | FDD's Long War Journal", *FDD's Long War Journal*, September 2021,

Afghanistan is embedded – are worried at the prospect of strengthening Islamist extremism because of the Taliban’s de-facto victory over the deposed National Unity Government (NUG) led by Ashraf Ghani. For all its shortcomings, including systemic corruption, the NUG was still a product of a republican, democratic setup that has been dismantled by a consolidating Islamic Emirate. Yet, like its predecessor, the Taliban’s political rule in Afghanistan continues to remain contingent on international economic succour, most of which has already been suspended.

According to the International Crisis Group, the Taliban sees itself “as already entitled to sanctions relief, which was promised on a timeline never met under the terms of the 2020 US-Taliban agreement.”⁷ However, the international community disagrees. As a “specially designated global terrorist” group, the Taliban has been placed under American sanctions that penalise any form of transaction with the entity. Enforced since 2002, its proposed revocation following the 2020 Doha Agreement between the US and the Taliban was never really implemented. Consequently, following the de-facto capture of power of Kabul by this proscribed entity has placed all sorts of financial dealings, including those related to payment of utilities, permit fees, import duties and the like under the thick clouds of sanctions.⁸

The equation of the Afghanistan government with the Taliban,⁹ notwithstanding both the proclaimed interim nature of the Taliban’s administration and its lack of international recognition, has created uncertainties regarding the scope of permissible/impermissible economic transactions that can be conducted with the country and its citizens. In fact, the implications of the American sanctions have been so far-reaching that the printing press in Poland, which was contracted to print the Afghan currency,¹⁰ has not been able to deliver its shipment to the cash-strapped nation.¹¹

Facing one of the worst economic meltdowns in history,¹² millions of Afghans find themselves without adequate currency, food and fuel to survive. Spontaneous markets have come up in and around major centres, with people selling and bartering their household effects. There have also been reports of families selling their children to save the remaining members from destitution.¹³ Today, the crises faced by the fledgling economy are not only multi-faceted, but they are also attacking the very foundation of an Afghan society teetering on the edge of total collapse. According to the World for Food Programme, there has been a steep increase in the levels of food insecurity in Afghanistan, with over 22 million people

<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2021/09/talibans-government-includes-designated-terrorists-ex-guantanamo-detainees.php>.

⁷ International Crisis Group, “Taliban Rule Begins in Afghanistan”, op. cit.

⁸ Lee Fang, “Humanitarian Exemptions to Crushing U.S. Sanctions Do Little To Prevent Collapse Of Afghanistan’s Economy”, *The Intercept*, 28 December 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2021/12/28/afghanistan-economy-collapse-us-sanctions/>.

⁹ International Crisis Group, “Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Catastrophe”, op. cit.

¹⁰ The official currency of Afghanistan.

¹¹ Lee Fang, op. cit.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Niamh Cavanagh, “Desperate Mom in Afghanistan Forced To Sell Her Twin Baby For \$104 So She Can Save The Other”, *New York Post*, 13 December 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/12/13/desperate-mom-in-afghanistan-forced-to-sell-her-twin-baby-for-104-so-she-can-save-the-other/>.

struggling to feed themselves daily.¹⁴ It is estimated that throughout the early months of 2022, nine million Afghans will face almost famine-like conditions.¹⁵

Skipping or substituting meals to get by,¹⁶ 55 per cent of Afghanistan's population is experiencing acute levels of food insecurity,¹⁷ where the said acuteness has begun to metamorphose itself into a full-blown healthcare catastrophe. On the whole, the already poor healthcare infrastructure is becoming virtually non-existent in the absence of sufficient monetary funds, supply of medicines and availability of staff.¹⁸ Battling the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and rising cases of infirmities, particularly on malnutrition, the limited availability of healthcare resources has stretched the system thin.¹⁹ It is no surprise then that the most vulnerable communities, including women and children, are bearing the brunt of the socio-economic and political breakdown currently plaguing Afghanistan. Rising malnutrition amongst infants is a particular source of worry, especially in the absence of nutritious food and availability of adequate and proper pre- and post-natal care. In fact, if the situation in Afghanistan continues to remain in its current form, it is projected that one million children will be exposed to the risk of dying of malnutrition in 2022.²⁰

Adding to the abysmal socio-economic scenario is the rise in the use of drugs and an increase in the threats of terrorism and radicalism, all of which will only paralyse a hamstrung Afghanistan further. Internal displacement is also becoming a major challenge for the country, especially given the politics surrounding forced migration within the borders of a nation-state. Unlike international displacement, which involves movements *between* countries, internal displacement is approached as a domestic matter that does not attract global attention lest it be understood as an intervention into a nation's internal issues. Ironically, however, despite being steadfast about their refusal to legitimise the Taliban's interim regime, key international players, including the US, remain oblivious to the practical collapse of the state's institutions in Afghanistan, impeding humanitarian efforts in its wake. It comes as no surprise, then, that the United Nations is going out on a limb and a prayer to collect as much as US\$5 billion (S\$6.78 billion) through funding appeals – its largest single country aid appeal ever.²¹

¹⁴ Ruby Mellen and Ledur Júlia, "Afghanistan Faces Widespread Hunger Amid Worsening Humanitarian Crisis", *The Washington Post*, 24 January 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/24/afghanistan-humanitarian-crisis-hunger/>.

¹⁵ International Rescue Committee, "Crisis in Afghanistan: Unprecedented Hunger After The Conflict", 2022, <https://www.rescue.org/article/crisis-afghanistan-unprecedented-hunger-after-conflict>.

¹⁶ Lisa Schlein, "WFP: Afghans Resorting to Extreme Measures To Keep Hunger At Bay", *Voice of America*, 11 September 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/6222603.html>.

¹⁷ International Rescue Committee, "Crisis in Afghanistan: Unprecedented Hunger After The Conflict." op. cit.

¹⁸ Jane Ferguson, "Afghanistan Has Become The World's Largest Humanitarian Crisis", *The New Yorker*, 5 January 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/afghanistan-has-become-the-worlds-largest-humanitarian-crisis>.

¹⁹ Chayanika Saxena and Roshni Kapur, "The Geopolitics of Aiding The Taliban's Afghanistan", Lowy Institute, 13 January 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/geopolitics-aiding-taliban-s-afghanistan>.

²⁰ International Rescue Committee, "Crisis in Afghanistan: Unprecedented Hunger After The Conflict", op. cit.

²¹ United Nations News, "Afghanistan: UN Launches Largest Single Country Aid Appeal Ever", United Nations, 11 January 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1109492>.

Human Security is Primal

Trapped in what has been described as the “chilling effect” of international economic sanctions,²² the Afghan economy is expected to shrink by 30 per cent by the end of 2022.²³ The myopic assessment of the domestic political situation in Afghanistan has resulted in a questionable withholding of Afghan assets by entities such as the US Treasury Department.²⁴ While the same is said to have been done to prevent the further consolidation of the Taliban’s puritanical stranglehold on Afghanistan, the sanctions have done little to ameliorate this conflict-ridden country of the group’s extremist afflictions.²⁵ On the contrary, these sanctions have created a domestic uproar against the international community, dealing a blow to the latter’s aspiration to tame the Taliban.

Left to its own devices, the Taliban has been granted a free hand to misgovern a crumbling Afghan society nearing “universal poverty”.²⁶ Many more Afghans may end up dying at the hands of sanctions-induced poverty than in the 20 years of war they have endured.²⁷

As the legitimate funds owed to Afghanistan remain frozen offshore, the spiralling crisis in this war-ravaged country is an urgent reminder of our misplaced priorities as a collective, global community. With the passage of Executive Order 14604 by Biden, a belated but much-needed course correction has been initiated. The said Order not only recognises the widespread humanitarian crisis and the deepening economic collapse that is currently imperilling Afghanistan but also goes a step further by declaring that these challenges “present a national emergency for the US”.²⁸

While we are yet to see a genuine discussion around Afghanistan’s security in the context of human security, we can leave that debate for another day. Right now, what we need is momentum around a concrete humanitarian action that can salvage whatever little remains of Afghanistan’s socio-economic and political system. Countries like India, which has allocated ₹200 crores (S\$36 million) as development assistance to Afghanistan in its annual budget for 2022, have shown that engagement with Afghans can happen even as the world continues to weigh how to appropriately interact with the Taliban’s interim regime.

²² Lee Fang, op. cit.

²³ Abigail Ng, “Afghanistan’s Economy Could Shrink By 30% Following Taliban Takeover, IMF Says”, CNBC, 19 October 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/10/19/afghanistan-economy-could-shrink-up-to-30percent-post-taliban-takeover-imf.html>.

²⁴ Ellen Loanes, “US Policy Is Fueling Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Crisis”, Vox, 22 January 2022, <https://www.vox.com/2022/1/22/22896235/afghanistan-poverty-famine-winter-humanitarian-crisis-sanctions>.

²⁵ International Crisis Group, “Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Catastrophe”, op. cit.

²⁶ Jane Ferguson, op. cit.

²⁷ International Crisis Group, “Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan’s Humanitarian Catastrophe”, op. cit.

²⁸ Scott R. Anderson, “What’s Happening With Afghanistan’s Assets?” Lawfare, 18 February 2022, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/whats-happening-afghanistans-assets>.

Afghanistan has been ravaged by war for more than 40 years. It is incumbent upon the international community to rescue Afghanistan from realpolitik and focus on the extremely dire situation facing the country and its people.

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