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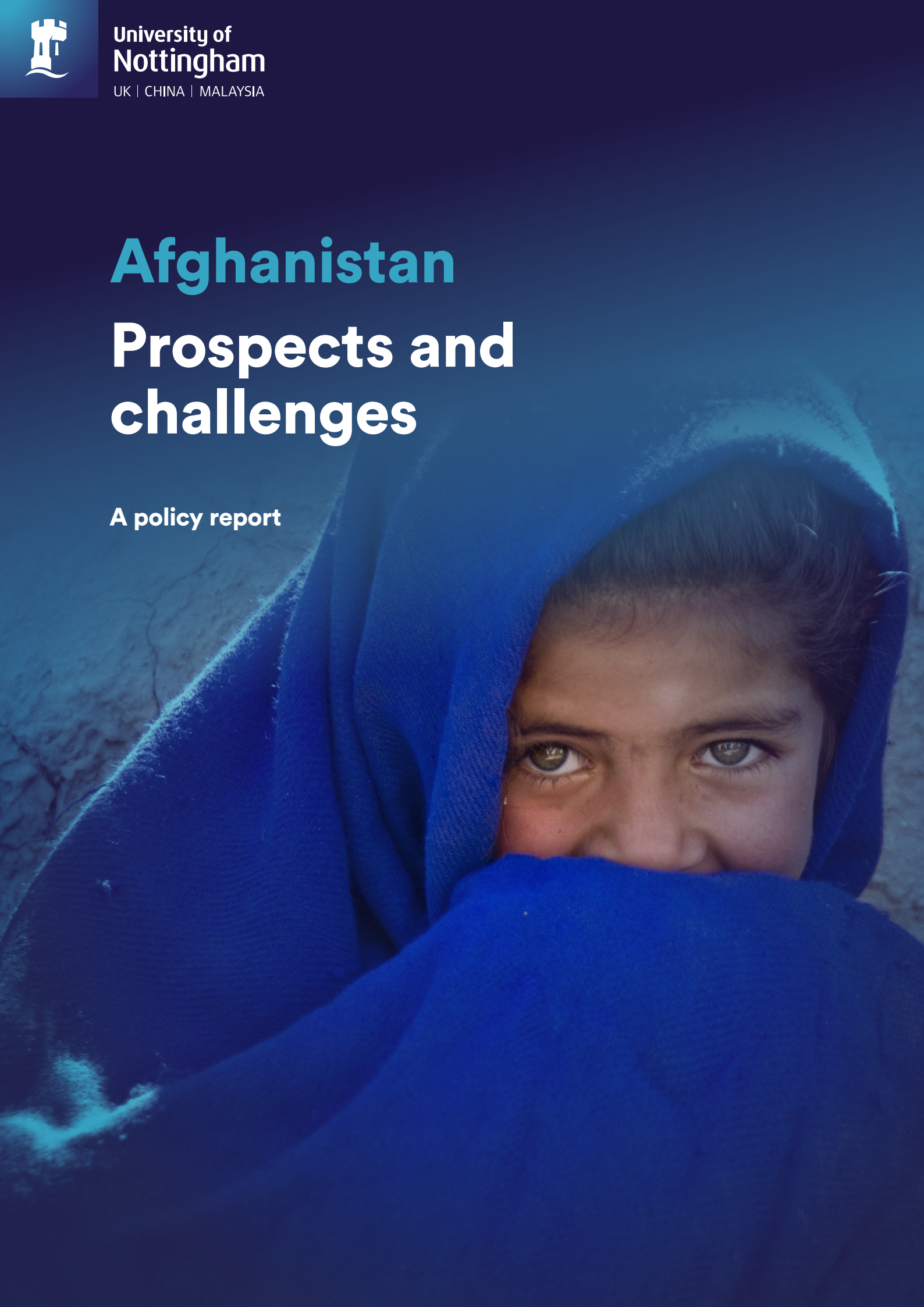
Afghanistan

Prospects and challenges

A policy report



> “There are deep international concerns over the future governance of Afghanistan, including the economy, polity, and society; issues that cut across the rule of law, economic development, social care, human rights (particularly of women and girls), terrorism, regional stability, and modern slavery and human trafficking.”

Afghanistan: Prospects and challenges

A policy report

Centre for the Study of Subversion, Unconventional Interventions, and Terrorism
Human Rights Law Centre
Asia Research Institute
The Rights Lab

University of Nottingham

This policy brief has been produced by scholars at the University of Nottingham with a foreword from Sir Rodric Braithwaite. All views expressed are those of the authors and not of the University of Nottingham. Please direct all initial inquiries to Todd Landman, Professor of Political Science, Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the Faculty of Social Sciences, and Executive Director of The Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham: todd.landman@nottingham.ac.uk

Photo credits

Cover: Afghan child; Panjwai District, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. Courtesy Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force, Afghanistan Media Operations Center.

Inside cover: A close-up of an opium poppy; Helmand Province, Afghanistan. Courtesy United Nations Photo.

Contents

Foreword

As a result of the dismal debacle in Afghanistan we have learned a number of things. Most of them we knew already. But with a bit of luck and good sense we may now draw the right practical conclusions.

The first thing we have learned is that liberal intervention designed to reengineer other people's societies does not work. It failed in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. The so-called successes, like Sierra Leone, have either been brief military interventions, which changed the government but not the regime; or — in the case of Germany and Japan — the reconstruction of sophisticated countries which had been unconditionally defeated in war, but which had preserved the elements of their pre-war bureaucracy, industry, and justice systems.

The second lesson is that 'counter insurgency' does not work either. The British failed in Palestine, Egypt, and Kenya. The French failed in Indo-China and Algeria. The Americans failed in Vietnam, Iraq, and now in Afghanistan. The reason is simple: you do not win people's hearts and minds if you kill their women and children by aerial bombardment or in night-raids. Calling it collateral damage and saying you are sorry cuts no ice. Again, the exceptions – Malaya, as the British always say — work only if the circumstances are very special.

Third, it is no good pouring aid money into a country which does not have the institutions to handle it. The Marshall Plan worked because the Europeans already knew how to run a modern economy but needed help in rebuilding the ruins. In too many recipients of ill-designed aid programmes, much of the money disappears into the greedy pockets of foreign contractors or the offshore accounts of local politicians and warlords. That is what happened in Afghanistan. Some now blame the Afghans for not having made better use of our generosity. That is grossly unfair.

None of this means that Afghans, Iraqis, Libyans, Egyptians, or for that matter Russians and Chinese, are incapable of democracy. Most ordinary people in most countries like the idea of replacing their corrupt and overbearing rulers peacefully with people they have chosen themselves. They too want their bosses to be constrained by an impartial law. Once they get the idea that it is a real possibility, most women in most countries would prefer to have education, the option of working outside the home, and some control over their family life. But such changes go very deep. They need patience and time to come to fruition. We do those people no favours when we dangle the possibility before them, and then scuttle when the going gets difficult, or when we get bored.

Those who took part in the Afghanistan intervention have a moral obligation to repair some of the damage they have done, to provide new lives for those who have been forced from their country, and to get medical and other aid to those who remain behind. To do that we will have to enter into some sort of relationship with the people who now run Afghanistan. Some jib at any formal recognition of the Taliban. But without informal arrangements which help the Afghan economy to get going again, the people we have deserted face disaster yet again. The obvious risk is that we will run out of enthusiasm before the task is done.

The flaw at the heart of our policy of intervention in Afghanistan was the idea that we needed to re-engineer the place if it was not to remain a base for extreme Islamic terrorist groups seeking to do us harm. But Al-Qaeda and others have shown that they can operate effectively from a wide variety of bases. Some of the worst terrorist atrocities were planned and mounted from within our own countries. The most effective means for dealing with that

are good intelligence, good police work, and the occasional use of unorthodox military force. None of that requires boots on the ground in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's neighbours — Pakistan, India, Iran, China, Russia and its Central Asian associates — have a far more direct and continuing interest in what goes on there than we do. Their mutual rivalries mean they will find it hard to cooperate effectively. We can use what diplomatic and political assets we have, to nudge them in the right direction. But our influence is likely to be limited.

These themes are among those usefully covered in the timely Policy Report by scholars at the University of Nottingham, *Afghanistan: Prospects and Challenges,* which follows.

Sir Rodric Braithwaite, GCMG

Executive summary

The prospects and challenges for Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the United States, the United Kingdom and other forces have many different and competing dimensions.

1. **The future of UK and US intervention.** President Biden has a long-held commitment to reduce the use of ground troops for nation-building and the 'export' of democracy. There is widespread support for the withdrawal, but ongoing contestation over the nature of the withdrawal, its impact, and next steps. Future US and UK involvement is likely to be from a distance, embodied in President Biden's policy of 'over the horizon' capability.

2. **Regional interests.** There are strong and differentiated regional power interests from Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran that will shape the future prospects of Afghanistan:

    a. The withdrawal creates new opportunities for influence and control for Russia.
    b. The withdrawal is a net gain but not unequivocal victory for China, which has new opportunities to extend its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), address regional security threats, engage in significant economic activities, and challenge the ambitions of the United States.
    c. The withdrawal represents the least optimal outcome for India and its troubled relationship with Pakistan, but there are opportunities to engage with AUKUS and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.
    d. Despite ongoing tensions with the Taliban, Iran may take advantage of the withdrawal in its international posturing towards the United States.

3. **Religion, governance and violence.** Religious fractionalisation and the continuation of extremist violence present significant challenges for the consolidation of state power and governance in Afghanistan. Afghanistan will experience a resurgence of terrorist organisational presence primarily from Al-Qaeda and Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K). The Taliban seizure of power and the declaration of the new Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is unconstitutional, limiting its ability to exercise its sovereign rights under international law and increasing international attention on the declining protection of human rights.

4. **Rights and sustainable development.** Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world with significant humanitarian challenges, which have been exacerbated by the withdrawal and the uncertain nature of foreign aid, foreign direct investment, trade, and access to basic needs. The country has a high prevalence of internal and external migration, as well as a high prevalence of various forms of modern slavery, including forced marriage, forced labour, child soldiers, and human trafficking. The formal status of women in positions of government, education, society, and the economy has already diminished since the withdrawal.

5. **The Way Forward.** There is a need for international actors to generate consensus on the way forward:

   a. **On-going international engagement.** There has been a heavy investment of 'blood and treasure' over 20 years of conflict. Withdrawal from military activities does not signal a return to isolationism and there is much to be done to continue to engage with the country and to assist Afghans.

   b. **A pragmatic realist approach.** There needs to be an understanding that the declaration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan means the Taliban regime is the effective government in control of the country. A 'pragmatic realist' approach to the Emirate is required from external actors.

   c. **Close attention to regional economic and political interests.** There should be recognition of the importance of Afghanistan for proximate regional powers, including Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran.

   d. **A strong counter-terrorism response.** There should be recognition of the ongoing and deepening threat of organised terrorism in Afghanistan and its immediate neighbours.

   e. **A strong counter-trafficking response.** There should be recognition of the ongoing prevalence and root causes for modern slavery and human trafficking across their many forms in Afghanistan.

Acronyms

AUKUS	Trilateral security pact between Australia, the UK and US
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative (China)
COIN	Counter Insurgency
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
CTF	Counter Terror Financing
ETIM	East Turkestan Independence Movement
EO	Earth Observation
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office
FMU	Joint Home Office/FCDO Forced Marriage Unit
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HQN	Haqqani Network
ICC	International Criminal Court
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISAF	International Security Assistant Force
ISIS-K	Islamic State-Khorasan
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
PITTING	The UK operation to evacuate people from Afghanistan
Quad	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States)
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise (China)
TIP	US State Department Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Programme
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children Fund

Introduction

Figure 1: Kapisa, Afghanistan. Courtesy Damien Surgeon.

The withdrawal of US, UK, and other forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 raises a significant number of policy implications for the future of Afghanistan, the region, and the world. The rapid advance of the Taliban, its takeover of power after 20 years of war, and the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan usher in serious questions concerning the utility of international intervention, counterterrorism, counter-insurgency, nation-building, the 'export of democracy,' sustainable development, conflict and humanitarianism, international law, human rights, and modern slavery and human trafficking. Drawing on the expertise of four research centres at the University of Nottingham, this policy report assesses future prospects and challenges relating to the withdrawal and the current state of affairs in Afghanistan. Scholars from the Centre for the Study of Subversion, Unconventional Interventions, and Terrorism,[1] the Human Rights Law Centre,[2] the Asia Research Institute,[3] and the Rights Lab[4] have come together to provide joint submissions and analyses across a wide range of policy areas to form the basis of this report. All views expressed in this report are of an academic and policy nature, and do not represent the formal views of the University of Nottingham.

The report comprises eight main sections. Section 1 provides a brief context and background to the current crisis. Section 2 focuses on the future of US and UK foreign policy in the country and region. Section 3 sets out the international legal challenges of the new Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in light of the Taliban's distrust and disdain for international law. Section 4 examines the competing strategic interests of regional powers, including Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran. Section 5 analyses the current economic context and future prospects for a country that has been notoriously poor and in receipt of significant foreign aid. Section 6 analyses the triple challenge of religion, governance and violence in Afghanistan. Section 7 examines the significant drivers and problems surrounding the many dimensions of modern slavery and human trafficking in Afghanistan. Section 8 offers policy recommendations for the short, medium, and long term.

Section 1: Background and context

Figure 2: Afghanistan evacuees depart a US Air Force C-17 Globemaster III at Naval Air Station Sigonella. Courtesy United States Naval Forces Europe-Africa.

The 31 August 2021 marked the end of the 20-year war in Afghanistan, following the withdrawal of United States, the United Kingdom, and other allied forces. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had been engaged in a multi-faceted and changing intervention that began on 7 October 2001 with an initial US intervention, less than one month after the terrorist attacks of 11 September and in accordance with the 18 September Joint Resolution to Authorise the Use of Force.[5] The intervention in Afghanistan initially targeted the Al-Qaeda terrorist group in general and Osama Bin Laden in particular. The objectives of the mission expanded over the period to include counterterrorism, counterinsurgency (COIN), stabilisation, nation building, and democratization. Over its twenty years, the war cost the United States more than $2 trillion (USD) and caused a total estimated deaths ranging between 238,000 and 241,000 people in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan.[6] US casualties for the war included 2,218 deaths with 1,833 killed in action, 285 'non-hostile deaths,' and 20,193 people wounded in action.[7] The total cost of the war for the United Kingdom was £27.7 billion, where total UK causalities include 456 killed, 2,209 wounded in action, and 7,807 hospital admissions.[8]

The US withdrawal plans followed an agreement with the Taliban[9] forged by the Trump Administration in Doha on 29 February 2020, which was then implemented by the Biden Administration during the summer of 2021. President Trump had issued a memo to remove all forces from Afghanistan in November 2020 by 31 December 2020, but White House officials nullified the memo quickly after General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, questioned its formal status.[10] President Biden has articulated long-held opposition to a prolonged involvement of US forces in Afghanistan and sought to remain committed to the

deal reached in February 2020,[11] but as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in his testimony to the US House of Representatives said, 'We inherited a deadline. We did not inherit a plan,' providing a partial explanation for the much-criticised process of withdrawal, which has been subject to Congressional oversight.[12] The 2020 agreement said:

> The United States is committed to withdraw from Afghanistan all military forces of the United States, its allies, and Coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel within fourteen (14) months following announcement of this agreement.[13]

By 31 August 2021, the US had airlifted over 124,000 people out of Afghanistan,[14] while the UK (Operation PITTING)[15] and other coalition countries also engaged in a rapid and complicated process of evacuation of personnel. The rapid advance of Taliban forces across the country and the fall of Kabul expedited the messy withdrawal and shortly thereafter, on 8 September 2021 the Taliban declared that it had established its interim government entitled the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The new government is a collection of 38 men from the previous period of Taliban rule including mostly Pashtuns, two Tajiks, and one Uzbek, while it does not include representatives from the Hazara community or other ethnic groups.[16] The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has not received formal recognised status internationally, but it is the effective government in power. As a result of the withdrawal and return of the Taliban, there are deep international concerns over the future governance of Afghanistan, including the economy, polity, and society; issues that cut across the rule of law, economic development, social care, human rights (particularly of women and girls), terrorism, regional stability, and modern slavery and human trafficking.

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456 deaths **2,209 wounded in action, 7,807 hospital admissions**

Section 2: The future of UK and US intervention

Figure 3: US Soldiers depart Forward Operating Base to conduct a patrol; Baylough, Afghanistan. Courtesy United States Department of Defense.

For President Joe Biden the chaotic exit from Kabul is a warning not to be distracted from greater challenges – such as the threat from China - by the hubris of liberal interventionism that saw the NATO mission in Afghanistan 'morph into a counterinsurgency, nation building.'[17] According to Biden, the United States had already succeeded in its mission more than a decade ago, namely 'to get the people who attacked us on 9/11 and to get Osama bin Laden, and to make sure that Afghanistan was not used again as a base from which to attack the United States or our Allies.'[18]

Al Qaeda redux?

The problem for the US, the UK and other NATO allies is that the new Taliban government in Afghanistan (and terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda) also get a vote. 'Moving on' will be possible only in the sense that the NATO-supported government is defeated, and troops are not on the ground. Other government agencies, especially intelligence services and those responsible for overseas aid will have to dedicate increased time and resources to Afghanistan. Even as Biden declared 'the end of the war in Afghanistan,' the facts on the ground in Afghanistan were changing. Thousands of foreign fighters, linked to international terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K), have crossed into Afghanistan in recent months. Al Qaeda, after years of retreat and attrition in Afghanistan, is resurgent.[19]

For now, al-Qaeda in Afghanistan continues primarily to train and build ties with terrorist groups in Central and South Asia; however, it is also looking for opportunities to carry out attacks against western and other international targets. Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's longstanding leader and Osama bin Laden's former deputy, was last reported to be based in the border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan (he recently released a video praising an attack against Russian soldiers in Syria).[20] Al-Qaeda, of course, has allies in Kabul, not least Sirajuddin Haqqani, the new Minister of the Interior.[21] Afghanistan is also swiftly becoming a humanitarian catastrophe, and will require increasing amounts of overseas development assistance in the coming months.

A new British policy for Afghanistan

What can the UK do in response to such a daunting set of challenges? London still holds considerable leverage over the Taliban, principally through its influence in the UN Security Council.

First, despite the Taliban's record of support for al-Qaeda, the UK should persuade other members of the Security Council and the General Assembly that it serves no purpose to refuse UN recognition of the Taliban-led government in Kabul. The Taliban is self-evidently no longer merely an insurgent or terrorist organisation. Other regimes with horrific records of human rights abuses, such as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, retain their representations at the UN. Recognition is not an endorsement; it is a pragmatic way to establish relations, offer incentives for moderation and, where necessary, apply international pressure and sanctions. Nonetheless, the Taliban will perceive recognition, initially at least, as a gesture of goodwill. This in turn may boost moderates within its leadership.

> "Recognition is not an endorsement; it is a pragmatic way to establish relations, offer incentives for moderation and, where necessary, apply international pressure and sanctions."

Second, the UK should advocate for an enhanced political role for the UN Secretariat in mediating with the Taliban. During the last two decades successive intermediaries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Pakistan and, most recently, the United States, have failed in negotiations with the Taliban, and indeed have used such talks as leverage to pursue their own interests. It is far better for UN Special Envoy to Afghanistan Jean Arnault or another senior international diplomat to engage the Taliban on a narrow list of critical concerns common to all permanent members of the Security Council. For example, among the foreign fighters presently in Afghanistan are al-Qaeda supported jihadists from the Russian Federation and China.[22] It may not be in either country's interest to block international leverage when it comes to resolving the presence and training of such fighters in Afghanistan. Contrary to common (mis)perceptions the UN Secretariat has had considerable success in mediation and peace accords in countries experiencing, or emerging from, civil wars.[23] There should be a division of labour between a special envoy leading a high-level dialogue and Deborah Lyons, the current special representative and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, allowing the latter to focus on meeting the rapidly expanding humanitarian needs of the population.

Third, the UK should learn the lessons from the crudely implemented Iraq 'Oil for Food' programme by seeking to minimise harm to the wider population in responding to the Taliban regime's crimes (as outlined in the economic section of this report). More targeted sanctions,

aimed at the international assets of regime leaders, may be necessary in the future – some like the Haqqani Network are already on the UN's list – but the UK and other UN member states should also work simultaneously to prevent the collapse of the Afghan banking system and the wider economy.

Fourth, although the UK/international donors will rightly protest against the segregation of educational classes according to gender (also a practice in other countries in the region), they should still seek ways to maintain some support for projects with Afghan schools and universities. Education in the country will collapse in the absence of international donor programmes such as those provided by UN Children's Fund (UNICEF). But donors should guard against any attempt by the Taliban to misuse the Afghan education system for the purposes of extremism and radicalisation.

Repairing Britain's reputation

The record of UK and western intervention in Afghanistan over two decades is one of haste and complacency. During 2002-2006, NATO missed key opportunities to reconcile parts of the former Taliban regime with the new government in Kabul. NATO member states then attempted to splurge resources in a few short years to kick-start an Afghan government that was already fundamentally compromised by political division and corruption. Finally, the US negotiated a withdrawal agreement that was quickly violated by the Taliban and completely demoralised its Afghan allies. Despite these failings, the UK still has every reason to stay engaged in Afghanistan – in doing so the UK can serve its national interests by seeking to undermine Al-Qaeda and other international terrorist groups, and perhaps recover some of its reputation in the region. The best avenue is through the United Nations.

Future options for the US and UK

US overt military intervention targeting the Taliban regime is highly unlikely. As set out above, President Biden has long wanted to pull out of Afghanistan and there is very little public or political desire for him to wade back in.[24] The near- to mid-term future will instead see covert or unacknowledged interventions, especially in an international world in which states compete in a so-called 'grey zone.' On 31 August, President Biden referred to this approach as a 'beyond the horizon' strategy:

> We will maintain the fight against terrorism in Afghanistan and other countries. We just don't need to fight a ground war to do it. We have what's called over-the-horizon capabilities, which means we can strike terrorists and targets without American boots on the ground — or very few, if needed.[25]

There is pressure within the United States to do something: to support the resistance, to disrupt and undermine the Taliban regime, and/or to continue countering terrorism. However, little appetite exists domestically, either amongst the public or politicians, for military intervention. In such circumstances, presidents typically turn towards covert action to bypass these domestic constraints. In a world in which means often drive strategy, the US has acquired plenty of experience in 'light-footprint' approaches recently from Somalia to Syria.[26]

President Biden may have withdrawn US troops, but this does not necessarily mean the end of US intervention in Afghanistan. Over his long career shaping US foreign policy, as chair of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, then as Obama's vice president, and now as president himself, Biden has demonstrated comfort with the idea of covert action and drone strikes.[27] He forwarded a minority view in the wake of the 9/11 attacks that the US needed to

resist the urge for a land invasion of Afghanistan that would lead to a mass nation-building campaign. He instead wanted the US to adopt something akin to an international policing mission, whereby Special Operations Forces (SOF) and intelligence agencies led a charge to kill or capture the ringleaders of the Twin Towers attacks. Indeed, when taking a leading role in President Obama's review of the strategy in Afghanistan after the administration took office in 2009, Biden consistently advocated the need for a counter-terrorism approach to Afghanistan that emphasized the targeted killing of key Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders, either by SOF teams or drones. [28]

Fast-forward a decade and members of the new Taliban government may not be immune to Biden's predilection for remote warfare. Fear of a US drone strike in retaliation for previous crimes (especially involvement in terrorist activity) helps explain why the identities of many new Taliban cabinet members have not been made public. They are still wary of US covert paramilitary action and have decided to keep their faces, and any pictures, out of public view.

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Other countries are also likely to intervene indirectly or covertly. The UK's 2021 Integrated Review and Defence Command Paper highlighted the importance of operating below the threshold of conflict and emphasized secret intelligence, special operations and offensive cyber. The UK has a history of intervening covertly when its waning assets do not match its global ambitions, and it would not be surprising if some in Whitehall are pushing for some sort of action in Afghanistan. [29]

A large-scale proxy war or covert paramilitary action to achieve regime change is unlikely; however, the US and UK (and others such as India or France) might turn to covert action for several reasons. These include keeping alive a spirit of resistance, communicating credibility to allies, or simply creating a stalemate by bleeding out a conflict. The US may see advantages in using covert action to signal resolve to the Taliban, disrupt their activities, or counter terrorist groups using Afghanistan as a safe haven. The Taliban's interim regime offers little confidence that they can be trusted to take counterterrorism seriously themselves.

Alternatively, Western states may seek to divide and discredit the Taliban using political warfare instead of attacking them through drone strikes: to exploit the various deals they negotiated with local leaders on their way to power, to split them from various terrorist groups operating on Afghan soil, to exploit growing tensions with neighbouring states. The situation remains fluid and unstable; Taliban rule is not inevitable. [30]

Although this looks promising and straightforward on paper, there is a real risk of mission creep, open-ended commitment, and tactics driving strategy. Coordination, clear and realistic goals, including benchmarks for success, are essential. These things have a habit of starting small and proliferating. Resistance leaders will over-emphasise their access to intelligence on Al Qaeda and Islamic State, requesting support – in the form of money, communications equipment, or training – in return. Any such deal, starting small as counterterrorism, risks

deepening and broadening covert intervention without sufficient scrutiny. Even limited aims of discrediting or dividing the Taliban, by for example supporting protestors, could end up inciting another civil war. It could also lead to the abandonment of those covertly supported if open military support does not follow when the Taliban crack down on protests.

We could also see more power and leverage going to intermediaries, especially given the US withdrawal from the country. By withdrawing from Afghanistan so determinedly, Biden has firmly pressed the 'reset' button on American foreign policy. He is keen to show that the 'War on Terror' era, as established by George W. Bush in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, is now over. Biden has no patience for open-ended nation-building exercises undertaken by American soldiers prosecuting counter-insurgency operations. Yet he is no isolationist either. His stance on covert action and the utility of American force over the past twenty years gives us strong reason to suspect the enhanced use of unconventional methods to keep the Taliban in check in the months and years ahead.[31]

Section 3: International law

Figure 4: Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations, Ghulam M. Isaczai. Courtesy United Nations Development Programme.

The status of Afghanistan as a state under international law is not affected by the purported change of name to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The issue is the status of a government that has seized power by unconstitutional means. There is no doubt that the Taliban in fact forms the effective government of Afghanistan, but it will struggle to be able to exercise the Afghan state's rights under international law (for example, to negotiate and enter into new trade treaties or to seek loans from the World Bank) until it achieves recognition as the legitimate government in law. This process of recognition will be slow, consisting of formal declarations of recognition by other governments or acts that equate to this (for example, by the exchange of ambassadors).

There is little evidence of any such declarations or acts of recognition to date. A number of countries have interacted with the Taliban regime since it came to power,[32] but this does not constitute implied recognition. Governments and organisations have to deal with the Taliban regime, for example, in order to secure foreign property, repatriate foreign nationals remaining in Afghanistan, or to deliver humanitarian aid to civilians. These are not acts of implied recognition, but rather simply an acceptance of the reality of the need for some interaction with a regime that controls a vast country with a population of 40 million. Some governments have indicated the conditions which have to be met before formal recognition may be accorded. For example, within hours of the fall of Kabul on 15 August, US Secretary of State Blinken made it clear that 'a future Afghan government that upholds the basic rights of its people and that doesn't harbour terrorists is a government we can work with and recognize. Conversely, a government that doesn't do that, that doesn't uphold the basic rights

of its people, including women and girls, that harbours terrorist groups that have designs on the United States or our allies and partners, certainly that's not going to happen.'[33]

The Taliban regime may point to the US-Taliban Agreement of 29 February 2020, which set the withdrawal of US forces in train, as some form of evidence of acceptance of the Taliban on the international plane. However, that agreement was stated in its title and throughout the text to be between 'the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America.' The agreement optimistically declared itself to be a 'comprehensive peace agreement,'[34] but it did not involve the elected government of Afghanistan or other Afghan parties, nor did it lay down any modalities for a peace process. Both parties to the Agreement promised to 'seek positive relations with each other' and anticipated that relations between the US 'and the new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government as determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations will be positive.' This cannot be seen as amounting to a formal acceptance by the US of a future Taliban regime as it did not come to power through negotiation and dialogue as envisaged in that agreement.

> "There is an argument that bringing the Taliban regime into the UN system would enable the international community to hold it to account for its human rights record. On the other hand, it is argued that treating the Taliban as a pariah regime, effectively outside the benefits of the international legal system, will be more effective in pushing it towards compliance."

As well as seeking the establishment of formal bilateral relations with other governments, such as the UK, the Taliban is also looking for what might be termed a form of collective recognition through accreditation at the UN. The Taliban will recall that in the period 1996-2001 its credentials were not accepted by the UN, and it looks likely that this will be the position in the short-term at least as the UN Ambassador representing the ousted government will continue to occupy Afghanistan's seat in the General Assembly until the UN's Credentials Committee decides otherwise. The Taliban has appointed a representative at the UN and has asked to speak at the General Assembly during its most recent session, but this request was not accepted, and in the end neither the Taliban nor the representative of the ousted government spoke.[35] There is an argument that bringing the Taliban regime into the UN system would enable the international community to hold it to account for its human rights record. On the other hand, it is argued that treating the Taliban as a pariah regime, effectively outside the benefits of the international legal system, will be more effective in pushing it towards compliance. Once the Taliban regime demonstrates that it is complying with Afghanistan's basic obligations under international law, then it is more likely to be accepted into the fold and its credentials accepted at the UN. The Taliban regime wants international acceptance but is unlikely to gain broad recognition until it guarantees and protects basic human rights, including non-discrimination against women and girls, and effectively prevents territory under its control from being used as the base for terrorist attacks against other states.

Alongside the issue of non-recognition, the Taliban regime remains subject to punitive measures, which will have to be lifted or suspended before normal relations between Afghanistan under a Taliban government and the international community can be established. UN sanctions have been in place against the Taliban since 1999 on the grounds of its support

for terrorism.[36] Although Taliban leaders have promised not to allow Afghanistan to be used as a terrorist haven, the problem it faces is that to have the sanctions lifted will require a positive vote in the UN Security Council, avoiding any veto by a permanent member. Such a reversal appears unlikely in the light of the fact that the Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution on 17 September 2021, which stressed the need to uphold human rights in Afghanistan, including those of women, children, and minorities. The Resolution emphasised 'the importance of the establishment of an inclusive and representative government' of Afghanistan noting 'the importance of the full, equal and meaningful participation of women.'[37] Unlike UN sanctions, unilateral sanctions imposed by states on the Taliban are of more dubious legality,[38] but they remain a barrier for the Taliban regime to overcome not only in its push for acceptance but also if it is to rebuild the economy of Afghanistan successfully.[39]

Afghanistan is a state party to the Rome Statute of 1998, which established the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague. In 2017, the ICC Prosecutor opened an investigation into war crimes and crimes against humanity being committed in Afghanistan, including those alleged to have been committed by the Taliban. Continued investigations and possible indictments would undermine the Taliban regime's claim to be the legitimate government. On 27 September 2021, the Prosecutor of the ICC sought an order to resume investigations stating that the

> …gravity, scale and continuing nature of alleged crimes by the Taliban and the Islamic State, which include allegations of indiscriminate attacks on civilians, targeted extrajudicial executions, persecution of women and girls, crimes against children and other crimes affecting the civilian population at large, demand focus and proper resources from my Office, if we are to construct credible cases capable of being proved beyond reasonable doubt in the courtroom.[40]

Given the failures of past military interventions in Afghanistan, it is unlikely that states will again seek to enforce international law through military means. The UN Security Council is extremely unlikely to authorise further military interventions in Afghanistan,[41] and states will confine themselves to limited airstrikes or drone strikes against terrorist targets in the exercise of the right to self-defence. Even the prospect of a massive humanitarian catastrophe is unlikely to provoke further large-scale military interventions. The international community has very rarely recognised its responsibility to protect endangered populations, with the intervention in Libya in 2011 being very much the exception.[42]

The Taliban regime has numerous legal barriers to overcome before it is accepted as an equal alongside other governments, which is the key to normalising peaceful relations between Afghanistan and other sovereign states. To achieve this, the Taliban regime needs to persuade the international community that its statements about respecting all individuals in Afghanistan as well as is rejection of terrorism translate into compliance with basic international laws, particularly those protecting human rights.[43]

> "Even the prospect of a massive humanitarian catastrophe is unlikely to provoke further large-scale military interventions."

Section 4: Regional interests

Figure 5: Map of Afghanistan and neighbouring countries. Courtesy Nations Online Project.

Given its geography, history and natural resource endowments, Afghanistan has been and will continue to be of great interest to proximate regional powers, including Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran.[44] Often dubbed the 'graveyard of empires,'[45] Afghanistan has a long history of foreign intervention from the British in the 19th and early 20th centuries (1839-1842, 1878-1880, 1919),[46] the Soviet Union and the United States in the late 20th century (1979-1989),[47] and ISAF in the 21st century (2001-2021).[48] The post-ISAF years will undoubtedly involve these and other powers, whose interests vary across the dimensions of strategic importance, international relations, security, trade, extraction of raw materials, and humanitarian assistance.

Russia

Russia is one of the few countries to maintain a diplomatic presence in Kabul following the Taliban takeover in August 2021. Some observers have since expressed fears that Moscow might seek to capitalise on the US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan by expanding its security, political and economic interests in the country and in wider Central Asia at the expense of the West. Yet, the situation unfolding in Afghanistan is far from an unambiguous win for Moscow.

The Kremlin has used the US withdrawal from Afghanistan to underscore its longstanding narrative of humanitarian operations and state-building efforts as a Western pretext for intervening in the domestic affairs of sovereign states and expanding its influence. As President Vladimir Putin put it, 'the crisis in Afghanistan is a direct consequence of irresponsible extraneous attempts to impose someone else's values on the country and to build "democratic structures" […] All of that leads to nothing but destabilisation and, ultimately, chaos, after which the masterminds behind these experiments hastily retreat.'[49] Official Kremlin statements on the situation have tended to juxtapose Western hypocrisy with Russia's pragmatic and cooperative approach, emphasising close contacts with Afghanistan's neighbours, strengthening multilateral efforts with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and the role of the United Nations. In the words of Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Russian Security Council, Russia's vision is the emergence of a 'peaceful, united and developing Afghanistan that does not pose a threat to the region.' In contrast to the West, according to Patrushev, Russia would support Afghanistan not by imposing political conditions, but by engaging with 'forces operating based on the will of the Afghan people.'[50]

The Kremlin's at times triumphalist discourse about Western failure in Afghanistan, however, has only thinly veiled its serious concerns about a host of potential security challenges facing Russia. In addition to fears about the aggravation of religiously motivated extremism in Central Asia and potentially in the North Caucasus, the prospects of destabilisation in and around Russia because of increased drug trafficking, organised crime, and mass migration have been discussed. Afghanistan's porous and difficult to secure borders with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, tend to be highlighted as a particular worry. Since August 2021, these concerns have led to efforts intended to strengthen the CSTO's joint military capabilities for supporting border security in Tajikistan (a member of the CSTO), efforts to increase Uzbek and Turkmen cooperation with the CSTO, and suggestions for joint CSTO-SCO counterterrorism exercises.

Moscow's relationship with the Taliban today can be understood better within the context of these security concerns. Although the Taliban is banned as a terrorist organisation in Russia, Moscow had started building ties to its leadership since 2015. This coincided with growing concerns over the rise of ISIS-K in Afghanistan, perceived by the Kremlin as a serious threat to other Central Asian states and, ultimately, to Russia itself. As such, limited engagement with the Taliban was conveyed as a pragmatic step to contain the ISIS-K threat and, from 2019 onwards, to promote a peaceful solution to the war and therefore stability in Afghanistan.[51] Cautious pragmatism best describes Moscow's portrayal of its relationship with the Taliban since the takeover of Kabul. According to Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, the Kremlin is not in a hurry to recognise the Taliban government. Instead, it is waiting to see whether the latter will deliver the self-declared goals that matter most to Russia: the establishment of stability within the country through the formation of an inclusive government, and the promise not to destabilise neighbouring countries.[52]

Considering Russia's existing stakes in Central Asian security affairs, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan will inevitably heighten Moscow's influence in the region. The Kremlin has used the situation to strengthen its narrative about what it has long portrayed as the failure of the US-led liberal international order and about its preferred alternative – an emerging multipolar world, in which Russia plays a central part. Moscow is likely to use existing structures like the CSTO and SCO as a vehicle to strengthen its role as a security actor in Central Asia and will to continue to tighten its relations with other regional states. However, considering Moscow's own costly experience in Afghanistan towards the end of the Cold War, the Kremlin is unlikely to see Kabul as a potential geopolitical prize or opportunity for pursuing material interests. Russia's dominant concern is to prevent Afghanistan from turning into a serious threat to regional and national security. Although the eventual spilling over of destabilising developments across Afghanistan's borders will be a much more immediate threat to Russia than for the West, the potential consequences of a deteriorating security situation in Central Asia are an international concern. As such, despite the breakdown in relations between the West and Russia since 2014, diplomatic efforts aimed at enabling a degree of engagement and cooperation in the region appear sensible.

China

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the enforced cessation of NATO involvement in the country is a net gain for China, but it is not an unequivocal victory. The US entanglement in Afghanistan took up resources and attention that are now free to be redeployed in the South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and broader Indo-pacific.[53] The sacrifice of western financial resources and the lives of American troops in supressing religious extremist violence served China's own interest and allowed it a free ride. The vacuum left by American withdrawal requires China to assume greater responsibility. Every indication suggests that China is preparing to do so in a markedly different way to the US, recognizing the Taliban as the legitimate government and using economic cooperation and financial inducements to secure its participation in serving Chinese interests. Prime among them is to prevent the spread of extremist violence into Chinese territory. Befitting the strategic pragmatism inherent in Chinese 'non-interference' and 'win-win economic cooperation,' China will work with the Taliban to secure and promote Chinese interests under the guise of aiding Afghan stability and development, notwithstanding the situation of its own Muslim minority community.

China has five major interests in Afghanistan:

1. Regional security and political influence

The US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan is of short-term benefit and presents longer-term benefits for China. In the immediate term, China no longer faces the reality of American armed forces in its immediate neighbourhood, but the US still has a large presence in South Korea (Republic of Korea). The withdrawal relaxes strategic pressure on China and presents an opportunity to fill a vacuum produced by the end of a meaningful American engagement with Afghanistan for the near future. China will work with regional partners, notably Russia and Pakistan, but with Beijing leading the approach. China has influence in Pakistan and the Taliban is beholden to Chinese economic aid and investment. Russia may have no choice but to accede to Chinese decision-making. To an extent, it is plausible to see that Russian and Chinese interests now align in Central Asia, and competition over influence in the former Soviet states can be set aside. It may be a poison chalice for China, but the west must now delegate the task of containing the spill over from Afghanistan to China and its partners.

In the mid-term, securing China's interests in Afghanistan to add to existing engagement with Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, China has the prospect of reducing India's strategic freedom and consolidating its influence over South Asia. China already has an intelligence-sharing arrangement with Pakistan, which may be extended to Afghanistan. The China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral dialogue at the level of Foreign Ministers is already operational. At the most recent of these meetings, the Chinese side emphasized Afghan political reconciliation, regional connectivity, and shared regional development. China will work bilaterally and multilaterally to secure investment and security in Afghanistan. Existing institutional architecture, in the form of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and in sub-regional groupings like the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Tajikistan Quadrilateral Co-operation

and Coordination Mechanism, can accommodate this task. China is well placed to lead a regional coalition of partners to help stabilize and develop Afghanistan, and to benefit from establishing influence with a Taliban regime that is reliant on China for economic reconstruction.

2. Regional development and connectivity

China has long hoped to incorporate Afghanistan into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Ultimately, China's ambition is to secure an overland route to Iran and Turkey circumventing the Pacific Ocean subject to countervailing American and western attentions. The state of Afghan security, lack of basic infrastructure, and ongoing American presence rendered this ambition remote. The two sides signed a BRI-related MOU in 2016, but tangible outcomes are thus far scarce. This project is now likely to receive a substantial boost. One possibility is for Afghanistan to join the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). CPEC is the central and most successful project under the auspices of BRI to date, with $60 billion (USD) in pledged investment in infrastructure, much of it in loans.

The extent to which projects on paper have been delivered is a question, but it is certain that the Taliban would be enthusiastic to join CPEC in some fashion. The possibility was mentioned at the recent trilateral Foreign Minister's forum as a means to enhancing regional connectivity. Connectivity to Central Asia through the BRI is envisioned as a facilitator of economic activity and development in Afghanistan and the region in the long term. It reflects the belief underpinning Chinese domestic development policy and its global engagement in much of the developing world that prosperity leads to stability. China's aspirations are big and still largely to be realised. A rail link under the Five Nations Railway Corridor would connect China-Central Asia-Afghanistan-Pakistan-Iran. Expansion of the Trans Himalayan Connectivity Network could include an Afghan Corridor.

On a smaller scale, the world should soon see the resumption of China-Afghan freight transport. In terms of one other dimension of the BRI, the Digital Silk Road, Huawei and ZTE have long been active in Afghanistan and are already responsible for the rollout of Afghan Telecom's 3G network. Chinese fibre optics also make up the majority of Afghan's network. This type of cooperation should expand as Chinese companies are marshalled to build critical infrastructure to aid Afghanistan's reconstruction. It is likely that these activities will be conducted under the auspices of the BRI. As Xi Jinping said in 2019, the plan in Afghanistan is to 'promote practical cooperation in economy and trade via the mechanism of BRI.'[54] Practical obstacles do not disappear with American withdrawal, but it has stimulated new momentum to move forward.

3. Economic development

Afghanistan faces major obstacles in order to become an attractive economic partner for China. However, China's incentives for promoting economic development in Afghanistan go beyond financial returns. Afghanistan currently requires substantial investment merely for basic services like food and medicine. In order to develop it will require enormous investment to build basic transportation infrastructure under difficult conditions. China has proven elsewhere that is has the appetite, resources and skills to achieve this, but whether it will have the stomach for a long-term commitment should there be setbacks (for example, attacks on Chinese business in Afghanistan) is another question. It will take some time for China to gain confidence in the security situation to determine what level of investment risk it wants to assume. However, it will seek to revive some of its business ventures in the short

term and it will be able to count on Taliban support. If foreign aid is cut off and assets remain frozen, the Taliban has no other choice but to fully embrace Chinese investment and agree to conditionality. The level of Chinese investment in the country has substantial room for growth. As of 2017 cumulative investment reached around $400 million (USD), a negligible sum compared with the pool of Chinese outward investment and what Afghanistan requires.

Three areas of economic activity are germane to China's interests: resource extraction, agriculture, and transportation infrastructure. This is a similar story to China's engagement in many developing countries. In Afghanistan, progress has been halting, due primarily to the security situation but also because of supply chain and infrastructural issues. Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) have tried their hand at investing, but it has not led to much success. In 2007, the China Metallurgical Group signed a 30-year lease on the Mes Aynak mine, potentially one of the largest copper mining projects in the world. In 2011, China National Petroleum secured a license for three exploratory blocks in Amu Darya basin to look for natural gas, which could have been worth $10 billion (USD). Progress toward an Afghan-China trade and energy corridor has been similarly halting. However, when the security situation improves and necessary infrastructure is built, Afghanistan does have mineral resources that China needs, mainly copper and lithium.

China has demonstrated an appetite and capacity for this kind of enterprise in Africa, South America, and Central Asia. It is not averse to working with any regime or in unpromising and dangerous conditions. In terms of trade, Afghanistan has some agricultural produce that is of interest to the Chinese market. One product, pine nuts, has relied on a symbolic but prohibitively expensive air corridor. Afghanistan is currently an insignificant market for Chinese goods, with low incomes, difficult borders for traders to negotiate, and impassable routes to market.

4. US credibility and relationships in Asia

Inward and outward facing Chinese media have used the withdrawal from Afghanistan to promote a narrative about American unreliability, lack of commitment, and untrustworthiness. This narrative seeks to undermine the US international image and to undermine its relationships with allies and would-be allies. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) spokesperson Hua Chunying summed up the messaging with 'wherever the US sets foot, there is turbulence, division, broken families, death and other scars in the mess it leaves.'[55] Implicit in this oft-repeated message is the contradistinction to Chinese hands-off economic cooperation. Chinese media have heavily promoted images of chaos and suffering to frame American withdrawal as a betrayal of Afghans. Parallel to this is an effort to frame China as a responsible partner sympathetic to local conditions and particularities in its dealings. This narrative seeks to build Chinese prestige and its image as a non-interfering, stable partner intent on win-win cooperation driven only by pragmatism and the common good. China was quick to provide an aid package of $31 million (USD) comprised of food and medicine. It has also authorised supply of three million vaccine doses.

The image of a caring and quick acting China juxtaposed with the chaos of US withdrawal and coming humanitarian crises is a gift for China's public image. China's engagement in Afghanistan will be used as a showcase for how Beijing supports partner countries without lecturing them, imposing their own set of values, or requiring local regimes to change in return for help (as long as they facilitate and support Chinese interests). The Afghanistan withdrawal taps into a broader Chinese narrative about the inevitability of American decline. Cybernationalists have revelled in American failure to defeat the Taliban after 20 years of trying, especially as the Taliban regime is now beholden to China's good graces. In short, it

is a golden opportunity to demonstrate that the US is unreliable, weakening cooperation and trust in the US as an ally and partner; an important issue as the US seeks to gather partners for its Free and Open Indo-Pacific project. One component of that project, maintenance of the status quo in Taiwan, has also been picked up by China, which sought to add psychological pressure on Taiwan by arguing that the US is unreliable and will not stand by Taiwan in face of the continuing challenges in the region. This logic, however, appears flawed since Taiwan and Afghanistan are discrete in their own terms and in what they represent to American strategic interests.

5. Extremist violence

Development assistance, financial aid, economic cooperation, and the conferral of political legitimacy to the Taliban is conditional on the Taliban support for China's standout priority, which is to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a source of extremist violence directed at China. Whether it takes the form of attacking Chinese interests operating in Afghanistan or facilitating extremist political violence on Chinese soil. Whether it is exiled terrorist groups, like the East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM), or foreign jihadis minded to fight for the Uyghur cause. China's prime concern is that a negligent or supportive Taliban could facilitate or inspire the resurgence of ETIM, with the unwelcome scenario of an imported insurgency into Xinjiang. Similarly, the Taliban must not allow Afghanistan to become a haven for foreign jihadis who look at Chinese actions in Xinjiang and determine that China is an enemy of Islam.

It was estimated by UN Security Council in 2019 that there were 3,500 ETIM fighters, a small but unknown proportion of whom are thought to be based in Northern Afghanistan. ETIM was designated a terrorist organization in 2002 by the UN/US, which the US reversed in 2020, to Chinese chagrin. Other reports in 2019 suggested a Turkistan Islamic Party training camp perhaps also somewhere in Northern Afghanistan. Such reports are vague and support the Chinese account of the dangers posed by extremism that have underpinned its actions in Xinjiang. They are also credible enough to prompt China to step up its security and counterterrorism efforts. It already has an intelligence sharing agreement with Afghanistan and Pakistan and this is likely to be channelled into counter-terrorism efforts.

China will also likely provide financial assistance for Afghan counterterrorism. China already has patrols on the Tajik border, and while it will not commit any military forces to Afghanistan, and is even reluctant to consider peacekeepers, securing China from potential extremist threats emanating from Afghanistan will be prioritised. Not only must the Taliban regime cooperate in these activities, it must also refrain from 'interfering in Chinese affairs' by criticising policy in Xinjiang.

It is clear that China will engage Afghanistan in a very different manner to the US and NATO allies. It will not deploy military force or pursue 'nation building' in Afghanistan. Instead, it will use diplomatic and economic inducements to encourage the Taliban to secure and promote Chinese interests and foster peaceful reconciliation and development. None of China's development interests in Afghanistan – extension of the BRI, infrastructure, mining, trade – can proceed without substantial improvements in the security situation. China will support the Taliban in its efforts to develop a coherent military force, increase government capacity and establish its legitimacy.

China will not throw money at Afghanistan; however, based on an assessment of risk it will be willing to finance reconstruction of critical infrastructure, possibly in the form of loans or other structurally advantageous terms. It will extend formal recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate government and in due course will work in the UN (likely opposed by the US) to

end the designation of the Taliban as a terrorist organization. It will cooperate with the Taliban for as long as it shows a willingness to accede to Chinese concerns – which it has recently indicated it will: 'Taliban will never allow any force to use Afghan territory to engage in acts detrimental to China.'[56] It is inconceivable that China will attempt to govern Afghanistan directly or by proxy, or to promote its own development model. There will be no lectures on human rights or democratization. China will try to bring Afghanistan into the regional networks it is building for its own longer-term strategic interests. China will encourage partners to help work with the country. In all this, China will retain its position of primary influence.

India and Pakistan

The Taliban's ascent in Kabul was probably the least optimal outcome for India among the major regional powers. The Indian government has been slower and more reluctant to engage in talks with the Taliban. For several well-informed former Indian officials, India observers, and analysts, this placed India at a disadvantage.[57] Recommendations to engage in talks earlier acknowledged how difficult that engagement would be for India given the history of such engagement, and the proximity of the Taliban to India's major regional rival, Pakistan.[58] India's foreign policy approach to the Taliban is still overshadowed by the legacy of the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight IC-814 in 1999 and subsequent attempts at negotiations with the Taliban authorities in Kandahar, and the consequent release of three radical Islamist terrorists from Indian prisons some of whom were allegedly linked to later terrorist attacks on Indian soil. The legacy influenced India's reluctance to engage in recent official talks with the Taliban, as did the ascendancy of *particular* figures within the Taliban in the new political configuration. For the Taliban, talks with India also pose risks for their enduring relationship with parts of the Pakistani state. India's limited involvement in this crucial phase of talks may limit longer term prospects for India's bilateral relationship with Afghanistan and give other regional powers like Russia and China a strategic advantage.

National security and development assistance

First and foremost, India's concern is national security – the potential for increased terrorist attacks on Indian soil from foreign terrorist groups or domestic radicalisation, and India's relationship with Pakistan, whose influence in the region has grown. India's concomitant reduced status and leverage in the region, both within and beyond Afghanistan, may have knock-on effects for its regional security interests, as well as for Kashmir. India will want to demand the Taliban credibly enforce the assurances it has given as part of the Doha agreement with regards to preventing terrorist groups based in Afghanistan planning attacks on Indian soil. While the Taliban appear to have begun operations against Islamic State affiliates in Afghanistan, the question remains whether they will be able to deliver, and what the consequences might be for both India and Afghanistan if they cannot. It is on this issue that India may prove to the be the most reluctant to recognise the new Taliban government officially.[59]

Second, in recent years India has provided development assistance to Afghanistan, including institutional and capacity-building of democratic processes and security capabilities, among other initiatives. India developed some goodwill and soft power through these projects, which helped enhance its status as a major regional power and emergent global power, a development donor rather than a recipient. With the US withdrawal and the Taliban's ascent to power in Kabul, prospects for re-invigorating such initiatives are unclear but are likely to be much more limited. For example, earlier proposals that envisaged a more mixed

coalition in government in Afghanistan and suggested India could continue to provide Afghan troops with military training and capacity building in India[60] now seem far less likely or desirable with a Taliban-led government, with many hard-line ministerial appointments, and without the presence of the US. India may also face increasing competition from China on infrastructure development in Afghanistan. India cultivated further goodwill providing Afghanistan with humanitarian assistance during the pandemic, but it is not yet clear if either the Taliban or India will be agreeable to such assistance or other humanitarian needs arising from the political transition. India and Afghanistan also have ties through youth education, but under the new Kabul regime, Afghan students may find travel for study abroad more restricted and/or have fewer funding opportunities, but this may be one area India could explore longer term.

Development assistance to the Taliban-led government may also face resistance within Indian government and party circles. Foreign policy agendas will be weighed up in the context of domestic support. Prime Minister Modi's global diplomacy efforts have characteristically been aimed at bolstering domestic support.[61] Thus, regardless of the pragmatism required for its foreign policy, a more conciliatory approach to the Taliban does not align well domestically with the Hindu majoritarian ideology of India's incumbent government. Prime Minister Modi's populist authoritarian image[62] thrives on being seen as a strong nationalist leader both at home and among its diasporas. While foreign policy is rarely cited as a key concern among voters in post-poll surveys, national security can shift election narratives, such as during the 2019 elections[63] and the February 2019 attack on Indian paramilitary police in Pulwama, in Indian-administered Kashmir,[64] which was followed shortly after by India's retaliatory airstrike on Balakot in Pakistan, targeting the terrorist group which claimed responsibility for the Pulwama attack.[65]

Prime Minister Modi's image abroad, however, has suffered as a result of the government's poor handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the perceived inequity embedded in the government's commitments to the supply of Indian-manufactured vaccines overseas compared to their lack of availability at home amid a devastating second wave. India's decision to grant e-visas to Afghan citizens regardless of background was initially lauded as a welcome and compassionate move, especially in contrast to its highly controversial Citizenship Amendment Act 2020, which was exclusionary towards Muslim refugees from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. However, the Afghan emergency e-visa scheme was not well implemented.[66] In the meantime, as India's image suffers, China has been able to develop its relationships with other states in the South Asian region.[67] Thus, the Modi government faces simultaneous reputational challenges and drivers at home and among the diaspora, and interest in recovering this image may influence India's approach to Afghanistan.

Regional co-operation

The manner of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan has reignited questions of trust in India's relationship with the US. The US furtherance of its pivot east towards containment of China through the recently formed AUKUS pact with Australia and the UK, the US may be even less interested in supporting India's interests in Afghanistan, though it will retain interest in Indo-Pak relations given their nuclear capabilities.[68] The potential for India to coordinate with China on talks with the Taliban, or compete with China in Afghanistan on development projects, also has to be seen in the context of India's strained relationship with China, made worse by recent border clashes along the Line of Control in Ladakh and India's membership of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad). India's position on the new AUKUS alliance and its effect on Indo-Pacific security, is not yet clear, however. An increasing naval presence of even its allies has the potential to diminish India's role, status, and interests in the Indian Ocean region.[69] With highly constrained relationships with both Pakistan and China, and limited

trust and leverage with the US, India may perceive greater prospects for co-ordination with Russia and/or Iran, with whom it has antecedents in relation to Afghanistan, though those relationships have their own complications and consequences for India's relationship with other allies.

Not all is lost for India, however. The strategic advancement of the Taliban's relations with China and/or Pakistan is not guaranteed; there are potential scenarios in which this may not go to plan. Within the Pakistani state, for example, there are divided opinions about the desirability of co-operation with the Taliban.[70] India will want to watch potential signs of shifting power dynamics between the two very closely, signs that the Taliban-led government are striving for increased autonomy from Pakistan's influence, something that India has sought for Afghanistan, though not with the Taliban at the helm. Lastly, India does not have to rely on bilateral relationships – it may choose to make more effective use of multilateral fora to voice its concerns and generate support from a wider array of interested parties in pursuit of its interests.

Iran

Iran and Afghanistan have many cultural and historical ties. Afghanistan's language, Dari, is a variety of Persian, around 10 to 15 percent of the population is Shi'a (for whom Iran sees itself as the global protector) and over the past four decades Iran has become host to around three million Afghan refugees, creating family connections that span across the 570-mile border.[71] After the Taliban takeover, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei fondly described Afghanistan as Iran's 'brother country' and Iranian officials have continually reiterated their support for the Afghan nation and its people.[72]

Relations with the Taliban

While Iran and Afghanistan have strong relations, the relationship between Iran and the Taliban is much more complex. When the Taliban were in power in the 1990s, they had a strong anti-Shi'a rhetoric and conducted systematic harassment, torture and killing of Shi'a Hazara. In addition, in 1998, after the capture of the Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif, the Taliban attacked the Iranian consulate, killing ten diplomats and a correspondent from Iran's state news agency. In response, the Islamic Republic threatened war by deploying troops to the border. The events of Mazar-i-Sharif are commemorated each year in Iran and have become the foundation for Iranian perceptions of the Taliban. After the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, however, Tehran began to appreciate the Taliban's efforts in resisting the United States, and their distraction of Washington from pursuing any further activities against President Bush's 'axis of evil,' specifically Iran. As a result, some members of the security regime provided support for Taliban leaders, including the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) arming anti-American fighters.

In 2015, it became clear that tensions between the two groups had thawed further, when a Taliban delegation made a secret visit to Iran to discuss the growing threat of Islamic State. Nonetheless, Iranians remain deeply pessimistic over Taliban relations. There are many fierce critics, including former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and a number of Reformist figures, and anti-Taliban protests have taken place recently in Tehran, Mashhad and Qom. However, the regime has reportedly advised media outlets, and Ahmadinejad, to tone down their criticisms.[73] Rumours of Iranian-Taliban skirmishes on the border have been denied on both sides and, having facilitated peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government in July 2021, Tehran is keeping dialogue open with both former President Hamid Karzai and Taliban leaders.

The future for Iran and the Taliban will depend upon how the Taliban regime treats its ethnic minorities, particularly Shi'as and Hazaras. In a speech given by Iran's Supreme Leader on 28 August he declared 'The nature of our relations with governments depends on the nature of their relations with us.'[74] While the Taliban have demonstrated some tolerance towards other groups – having, for example, appointed a Hazara Shi'a cleric as a district governor, allowing Shi'as to hold Ashura commemorations and regularly condemning attacks on Shi'a mosques – it failed to form an inclusive government, something for which the Iranians had been pressing. For now, Iran is cautious and pragmatic. It has not ruled out working with the Taliban but has continuously called for elections to determine Afghanistan's future. Most Iranians remain sceptical of the Taliban claims to increased tolerance and believe it to be only a matter of time before attacks on Shi'as resume. It is then that Tehran will have to make some difficult decisions.

Opportunities

The events in Afghanistan have provided Iran with some opportunities. First, it has afforded Tehran the forum to condemn Washington's intervention in Afghanistan and broader foreign meddling. The Islamic Republic has also heralded the Taliban's victory as a strategic defeat for America and celebrated the withdrawal of troops as the end of American dominance in the region. Second, it has emboldened Iran's rhetoric of resistance, especially amongst the IRGC, with warnings issued that other American bases will soon meet the same fate and recommendations that regional leaders separate themselves from links to the US. Third, from an internal perspective, the events have validated Iran's investment of its 'axis of resistance' – the countries, militias and groups allied with Tehran to resist Western influence. There is even some hope that Afghanistan will now participate in the axis and strengthen Iran's "resistance economy" to counteract American sanctions. Fourth, from an external perspective, the changing geopolitical landscape has allowed Iran to build new alliances. In particular, foreign ministers from Afghanistan's neighbouring countries have kept in regular communication, whilst Iran and Pakistan have been working together on mutual security concerns. In addition, Iran is looking to leverage its status as the former interlocutor between the Afghan government and the Taliban to gain broader diplomatic and international influence, and especially to establish itself as a useful ally for China and Russia.

Concerns

The main concern for Iran is to ensure Afghanistan's security and stability. Any instability would lead to hundreds of thousands of Afghans crossing the border into the Islamic Republic, which is already suffering from severe economic and health-related pressures. Insecurity would also provide a vacuum for terrorism and ISIS-K to grow and become a major threat for Iran. Outside these concerns, the US vacuum has left room for new international players to enter a great game in the region, whilst changing regional dynamics could give increased power to a rival regional actor. In particular, having allowed the Taliban to set-up offices in Doha, and facilitating Western withdrawal, Qatar has increased its diplomatic significance in the region, which could threaten Iran's interlocutor ambitions. Turkey has also revealed an interest in Afghanistan, having secured Kabul International Airport and provided economic cooperation to the new regime. This activity, in combination with an increased presence in the Caucasus, is leading Iran to feel encircled by its rival. Finally, the Taliban's new cabinet has a distinct leaning towards Pakistani sympathies, which could threaten Iranian economic interests, particularly the prioritisation of Chabahar on the coast of the Gulf of Oman over Gwadar in Pakistan, as the preferred port for the transit of goods from India through Afghanistan and into Central Asia.

Afghanistan: Prospects and challenges

> "... from an external perspective, the changing geopolitical landscape has allowed Iran to build new alliances. In particular, foreign ministers from Afghanistan's neighbouring countries have kept in regular communication, whilst Iran and Pakistan have been working together on mutual security concerns."

Section 5: Economic context

Figure 6: Villager; Helmand province, Afghanistan. Courtesy United States Marine Corps.

With the withdrawal of the US-led coalition, Afghanistan faces not only a daunting security outlook, but also a troubling economic future. The removal of international support to the budget risks a sudden shock with major macroeconomic and microeconomic repercussions. Inflation and downward pressure on both business and household incomes loom. Food insecurity and perhaps even famine may follow. Together, these will increase vulnerability to human trafficking, forced labour, and child labour (see page 37).

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. 90 percent of the country lives on less than $2 (USD) per day. Half the country's population lives below the poverty line. The country is poor in part because it does not produce large volumes of valuable goods or material that it can sell abroad. As a result, Afghanistan has traditionally run a trade deficit. For the last two decades, this has amounted to around 25 to 30 per cent of GDP, around $6 billion (USD). International donors have made up the budget gap, often by flying in foreign currency in bulk, to purchase imports.

With the US-led coalition withdrawing from Afghanistan, the World Bank, IMF, and foreign governments are suddenly stopping their disbursements. International sanctions on the Taliban prevent foreign government and international organizations from providing financial aid. They are also the basis for freezes on around $9.4 billion (USD) in Afghan government assets held overseas, including $7 billion (USD) held at the US Federal Reserve. Without access to these funds, Afghanistan will soon run out of the foreign currency it needs to purchase imports. A fifth of the country's imports are oil and petroleum products; basic necessities for any economy and central to food distribution in Afghanistan, where food makes up another tenth of all imports. Around 14 million Afghans are already food insecure.

Two million children are already malnourished. A sudden stop to food and petrol imports will make things much worse. A sudden import crunch would place massive upward pressure on domestic food prices, threaten household budgets, and risk food shortages. Save the Children reports that the price of flour rose around 40 percent in August 2021 in some parts of the country.

Afghans are also dealing with high risk of rapid devaluation of their national currency, which has lost 11 per cent of its value in the last three months. Further depreciation will drive up the cost of imports and fuel currency speculation. Resulting price spikes will hit the worst-off hardest. Depreciation may also trigger bank runs, which led many banks to close and reduce services in the period after the US withdrawal. Meanwhile, counter terrorism financing obligations are also leading many money transfer businesses to cease service to Afghanistan. With remittances worth around four percent of GDP and propping up many household budgets, this spells further trouble.

In addition, 70 percent of Afghanistan's electricity is imported – and must be purchased with foreign currency. Reduced electricity imports mean rising electricity prices, which will further contribute to an economic downturn, especially in urban settings. The result of this downturn may be a population flow back into the countryside, further stressing food systems. Meanwhile, the upward pressures on oil and petrol prices will impede rural food distribution, which relies in Afghanistan on truck transport.

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world.

90%
of the country lives on less than $2 (USD) per day

50%
of the country's population lives below the poverty line

14 million
Afghans are already food insecure

Two million
children are already malnourished

A fifth of the country's imports are oil and petroleum products; basic necessities for any economy and central to food distribution in Afghanistan

70%
of Afghanistan's electricity is imported – and must be purchased with foreign currency

Section 6: Religion, governance, and violence

Figure 7: Former Taliban fighters line up to handover their Rifles to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; Ghōr, Afghanistan. Courtesy United States Department of Defense.

The religious dynamics of a Taliban-governed Afghanistan will further complicate future policy planning towards the country. Three of the most challenging issues to navigate, especially for Western governments, will be the rule of law, the protection of religious minorities, and violent extremism. Effective policy responses will require decision makers to look beyond the stated ideologies of militant religious organizations and consider the strategic environment in which the groups operate. They must also manage negative biases that can paint rivals, especially militant religious groups, in an overly harsh light and, consequently, miss opportunities for cooperation.

Rule of law

The Taliban's plan to rule Afghanistan according to Shari'a remains one of the most pressing concerns of diplomats, analysts, and human rights activists.[75] The militant group implemented a strict, exclusivist interpretation of Shari'a during the 1990s. This included harsh, public punishments such as executions of convicted murderers and adulterers.[76] Flashy headlines about beard trimming bans in Helmand province and the chastising of young men in Kabul for wearing jeans have stoked worries of a return to uncompromising, punitive social policies. The creation of an all-male cabinet filled with hard-line clerics, as well as new regulations on women's clothing at private universities, has further added to this anxiety, especially about the fate of women's rights.

Recent Taliban actions should not be dismissed out of hand; however, since drawing conclusions about the group's intentions too quickly could lead to missed opportunities for influence. It still remains unclear, for instance, whether regional policies or isolated public punishments represent the formal Taliban position or problems with command and control. Senior Taliban officials themselves remain vague about the rules and restrictions they will implement, although they have insisted these will be different from twenty years ago.[77] Many experts also maintain that it is likely the Taliban of today will veer in significant ways from the past given the group both faces a new set of challenges and is more conscious of its public image. Assuming the group is hard line and treating them as such could create a self-fulfilling prophecy, not to mention ignores internal divisions within the group. Engaging the Taliban, instead, could help to hold the group accountable for its stated commitment to respect women's and minority rights 'within the framework of Islamic law,' as well encourage a more moderate implementation of Shari'a throughout the country.

Religious minorities

Another and related concern is the degree to which religious minorities will remain safe and free to practice their faith under Taliban rule. For many, the destruction of the Buddhist statues of Bamiyan in 2001 remains a defining moment of the group's previous control of the country. Far more common and routine, of course, was the harassment and persecution of Sikhs, Hindus, Bahai, Ahmadiyya Muslims, Hazara Shias, and Christians. Many minorities were even pressured to convert to Islam or be executed. In the case of Hazara Shias, the Taliban carried out mass killings from Mazar-i-Sharif to Robatak Pass to Bamiyan Province.

The initial period of Taliban control raises serious worries about a return to this pattern of religious discrimination. According to Amnesty International, Taliban members tortured and murdered a number of Hazara Shias in the lead up to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.[78] Other reports suggest threatening letters were sent to Christian churches.[79] And, more recently, the group took control of the Hazrat Ali mosque of Mazar-i-Sharif, a mosque especially venerated by Hazara Shias. While religious freedoms are again deteriorating under Taliban rule, it is important to note that such freedoms were far from stable prior to the US withdrawal. The *2020 Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom,* for instance, highlighted a persistent pattern of religious discrimination in the country, pointing to a lack of security and political stability as the primary drivers of this trend.[80] As such, if foreign governments are serious about improving conditions for religious minorities, they need to look beyond the ideological motivations of the Taliban and do more than name and shame the group for its religious freedom and other human rights violations. Sustained efforts need to be made to improve the political stability of the country.

Violent extremism

A final concern for foreign policymakers that may be complicated by the religious dynamics of Afghanistan is whether the country will once again become a safe haven for terrorists. Under the Doha Agreement, the Taliban has committed to preventing attacks being launched from Afghanistan. The group has not - despite some reporting to the contrary - agreed to cut off relations with other Islamist groups, nor to expel them from the country.

That said, some diplomats and analysts expressed initial optimism that the Taliban might go beyond its formal pledge in order to achieve the international recognition it seeks. In particular, policymakers hoped the Taliban would break off its ties to the Haqqani network (HQN) and al-Qaeda, while also stepping up efforts against what is often referred to as its

ideological rival, ISIS-K. The appointment of seasoned and hard-line battlefield commanders to senior government posts, of course, has tempered such hopes. Sirajuddin Haqqani's selection as interior minister has been perhaps the most troubling. As the current leader of HQN, Haqqani's selection signals for many that the Taliban has no interest in cutting ties with jihadist groups. Other analysts have warned of recent tactical and strategic cooperation between ISIS-K and HQN, if not the entirety of the Taliban. These connections, even if temporary, stand out as a stark reminder of the complicated jihadist networks that persist in Afghanistan. Attempts to predict the behaviour of groups based on ideological positions will continue to fail if they do not also consider the strategic environment in which the Taliban and other militant groups operate.

Section 7: Conflict, modern slavery, and human trafficking

Figure 8: Afghan child refugee; Kabul, Afghanistan. Courtesy International Security Assistance Force HQ Public Affairs.

Afghanistan has experienced decades of political instability and insecurity amid successive wars and violent conflicts.[81] During the last four decades, Afghanistan has witnessed an unprecedented scale of population movements, mainly due to war and conflicts between rival powers and their proxies.[82] As of mid-2019, there were 149,000 international migrants in Afghanistan, while the total number of Afghan emigrants in foreign countries was 5.1 million.[83] Aside from conflict-induced migration, research by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has noted that Afghans are forced to migrate either internally or to countries such as Iran and Pakistan, because of natural disasters, poverty, and human trafficking.[84]

Alongside these general patterns in migration, modern slavery, especially trafficking in persons, is widespread across Afghanistan. Trafficking mainly occurs internally and to a lesser degree across borders, with Afghans of different ages and genders exploited in diverse sectors.[85] More specifically, over 60 percent of women and child trafficking takes place within Afghanistan, while cross-border trafficking accounts for 40 percent of cases.[86] The security and cultural context in Afghanistan generally has made it difficult to understand the actual situation of modern slavery in the country, as many of the practices are hidden from view,[87] while entrenched cultures prevent victims from reporting cases of abuse or exploitation.[88] Nevertheless, a study by the Walk Free Foundation indicates that Afghanistan is among the top 10 countries for modern slavery prevalence globally, estimating 749,000 people enslaved in its 2018 Global Slavery Index.[89]

The majority of trafficking victims in Afghanistan are children compelled to work in brick kilns, carpet making factories, domestic servitude, commercial sex, salt mining, transnational drug smuggling, and truck driving, among other sectors.[90] Narratives from survivors of modern slavery suggest how they have conceived of their enslavement and trafficking experiences as rooted in of poverty, conflict, and gender oppression.[91] Many Afghan boys are forced to perform *bacha bazi*, or boy play, where men including members of the military and police force, tribal leaders, warlords, and mafia heads, exploit them to provide social and sexual entertainment. These boys are often used as dancers at parties and ceremonies, where they may be sexually exploited.[92] Restrictions around female mobility and visibility often makes men and boys more vulnerable to labour exploitation than women and girls in Afghanistan. Afghan culture largely forbids women from working outside of the home after reaching puberty, although some women are still trafficked for labour exploitation, where they work in more obscure settings or at night.[93] The emerging restrictions on women's mobility and participation in government, education, and work will exacerbate these conditions further.

> "The alarming economic and public health cocktail following the withdrawal of US and other forces will significantly amplify further the drivers of vulnerability to human trafficking, forced and child labour."

The coronavirus is having a devastating impact on Afghans and the national economy. A World Bank report has recently noted that the country's economy is rapidly contracting, given disruptions to local businesses, regional trade, and remittance flows.[94] Declining incomes and increasing prices of commodities are particularly increasing hardship for the most poor, with poverty rates expected to have increased to 72 percent during 2020. The alarming economic and public health cocktail following the withdrawal of US and other forces will significantly amplify further the drivers of vulnerability to human trafficking, forced and child labour. It is clear that female participation in the workforce, and in education, will drop – which is known to increase vulnerability to trafficking and forced marriage. Pressures on household budgets will likely reduce school attendance rates and increase child labour. Demand for emigration, both regular and irregular, will increase, creating demand for people smuggling services, placing emigrants at risk of trafficking.

Various Afghan governments since 1963 and before the 2021 withdrawal had ratified a large number of international anti-slavery treaties, ranging from the 1926 Slavery Convention to the 2011 Domestic Workers Convention. Between 2001 and 2020, the US State Department Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (TIP) ratings of Afghanistan have varied from 'not meeting minimum standards' without significant progress (2001, 2020), on the 'watch list' (2010-2013, 2016), and/or 'not meeting the minimum standards' but making progress (2002-2009, 2014-2105, 2017-2018).[95] Since the Taliban regime does not support or adhere to international law, these commitments are likely to be undermined, ignored, and/or discarded by the new government. There thus are many intersecting and complex factors for the continued problems of modern slavery and human trafficking in Afghanistan.

There is a strong relationship between conflict and modern slavery across the world. Augmenting data that forms part of the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP) shows that conflicts around the world, including those involving terrorist groups such as ISIS,[96] involve instances of sex trafficking and forced marriage, forced labour, child soldiers, and human trafficking.[97] Across all conflicts in 177 countries between 1989 and 2016, there have been different types and proportions of enslavement, including 87 percent involving child soldiers,

32 percent sexual exploitation/forced marriage, 21 percent forced labour, and 14 percent human trafficking. The case of Afghanistan is no different.[98]

In Afghanistan between 1989 and 2016, the use of child soldiers took place in *every* conflict identified. Moreover, in every conflict identified, both sides (Afghanistan and a variety of non-state actors) simultaneously used child soldiers. For example, when the government of Afghanistan was forcing children into combat roles in 2011, the Taliban was doing so as well. Whilst cases are often underreported, child soldiering is thought to be more prevalent in northern and north-eastern parts of the country.[99] Families are often coerced into volunteering their children to join armed groups. There has been an increase in the number of children recruited and used by armed groups, including pro-government groups and insurgent groups, such as the Taliban and ISIS-K.[100] During Covid-19, insurgent groups have targeted children due to school closures.[101] While the recruitment of children by pro-government armed groups will end, there may well be a continued increase in the number of children used by the Taliban and ISIS-K armed groups. The use of child soldiers is illegal in Afghanistan, which in 2003 ratified the UN protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2002); however, the recruitment of children as soldiers has been an issue throughout the armed conflict and will remain an issue after the Taliban coup.[102]

The use of sex trafficking and forced marriage also took place in 100 percent of the cases of conflict examined. The breakdown of cases, however, is not as uniform as with child soldiers. The Afghan Government was the only actor engaged in acts of sex trafficking and forced marriage about 21 percent of the time compared to the Taliban, which engaged in such acts more than 50 percent of the time. Meanwhile, both the government and the Taliban committed acts of sex trafficking and forced marriage about 25 percent of the time.[103] Since 2017, data from the joint Home Office/FCDO Forced Marriage Unit shows that 80 percent of cases they handled involving Afghanistan have female victims, and 20 percent male. In line with other data from the FMU, around 80 percent of victims are in the UK when they contact the FMU and 20 percent abroad.[104] The NGO Girls Not Brides estimate that 4 percent of girls in Afghanistan are married before the age of 15, and 28 percent by the age of 18, with 7 percent of Afghan boys also married by age 18.[105] Future prospects very much depend on security in Afghanistan, and in line with FCDO advice, travelling to Afghanistan carries additional risk of forced marriage and is likely to limit inbound mobility.[106]

> "The NGO Girls Not Brides estimate that 4 percent of girls in Afghanistan are married before the age of 15, and 28 percent by the age of 18, with 7 percent of Afghan boys also married by age 18."

Human trafficking occurs when state and non-state actors buy and sell human beings for financial profit. Unlike the use of child soldiers and acts of sex trafficking and forced marriage, instances of human trafficking did not take place in every conflict in Afghanistan. The Taliban were often the lone offender, 71 percent of the time, while the government was the sole offender in about 21 percent of cases. There were no overlapping instances of both the government and the Taliban engaging in such acts at the same time. Traffickers frequently entice whole families to engage in bonded labour. In particular, carpet making across the country, as well as brickmaking in eastern regions is prevalent, according to the 2021 TIP report. During the pandemic, there have been indications that Farah and Helmand provinces are regions that have some of the highest rates of child labour in Afghanistan.[107] Over the past year, families have sent boys to work in opium production in Iran and other provinces, most notably in Herat province, which borders Iran.[108] Girls increasingly supplement household income by working.

Girls engaged in child labour was notably higher in Maidan Wardak, Kunduz, Helmand and Sar-e-Pul provinces.[109] Due to greater reliance on taking loans during the Covid-19 crisis, risks of bonded labour have increased. Increased rates of child labour may well be set to continue in the coming months as the aftershocks of the pandemic play out in tandem with the collapse of the former Government and the withdrawal. Families may continue to send children to work in neighbouring countries such as Iran or Pakistan, which may place them at additional risks of exploitation.

A final form of contemporary slavery includes the use of forced labour. Compared to other forms of enslavement, the use of forced labour was comparatively scarce, taking place about 21 percent of the time, and only when the Taliban was the offender. Child labour is considered by humanitarian groups to be one of the most pressing concerns in Afghanistan.[110] Attacks on schools and on children pursuing an education have continued during the pandemic and may escalate in the months and years to come.[111] During the pandemic, children living in Non-State Armed Group-controlled areas were at heightened risk of not attending school and engaging in child labour instead.[112] This trend may well continue as a result of the Taliban's seizure of power of the vast majority of the country.

Future policy on modern slavery and human trafficking

Afghanistan formally has a legal framework in place to combat modern slavery and human trafficking owing to its increasing participation in international legal instruments that provide *de jure* protection for individuals; however, the *de facto* reality on the ground and the many drivers for modern slavery suggest that there are huge challenges ahead. There are currently weak international mechanisms in place to address this implementation gap, but new trade sanctions articulated by strong trading countries and blocs (such as the EU) could be used to extend to Afghanistan, as part of a broader 'shift to the use of trade policy as an instrument to deter human-rights abuses.'[113]

A second and more distant approach is to monitor the status of different sectors in Afghanistan known for high prevalence of modern slavery to build a robust evidence base for continued advocacy. Satellite Earth Observation (EO) imagery has been used to document the scale of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, as well as assist in the evacuation of people. Very high-resolution commercial satellite imagery has captured scenes of thousands of people gathering on runways and near aircrafts as they try to escape Afghanistan.[114] Away from the emergency application of EO data, satellite imagery offers a remote and timely intelligence source to track the new Afghanistan landscape under Taliban control. In the past, the Taliban has relied on various forms of extortion or criminal activities as funding sources, including opium production and mineral resource extraction. Poppies and coal have been recognised by Anti-Slavery International as products of child and forced labour in Afghanistan.[115] Satellite EO data can be used to detect and monitor both sectors spatially and temporally. Cranfield University is leading on a project using EO and big data analytics to investigate the seasonal and annual changes in opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan.[116] The Rights Lab has ongoing work that applies satellite radar interferometry providing data on brick kilns in South Asia, illegal fishing in Bangladesh, and cobalt mining activities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.[117] This work has transferable technology and skills, which could be applied to analyse past and future mining, poppy harvesting, and other production processes in Afghanistan.

Section 8: Policy recommendations

Figure 9: Afghan Institute of Learning, founded by Nobel Prize nominee Sakena Yacoobi, a long-time advocate for women's rights in Afghanistan; Kabul, Afghanistan. Courtesy Direct Relief.

It is clear from this report that Afghanistan faces a large number of complex challenges for its future, which cut across all dimensions of governance, society, economy, and polity.

Our policy recommendations, which emerge from this report, are summarized here and are aimed in particular at the UK and intergovernmental policy community, including: the Foreign Affairs Committee; the International Relations and Defence Committee; the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office; the Ministry of Defence; the Cabinet Office (including the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund); the Home Office; the Border Force; the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Afghanistan; the APPG on Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery; the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery; the UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons; and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

1. **On-going international engagement.** There has been a heavy investment of 'blood and treasure' over 20 years of conflict. Withdrawal from military activities does not signal a return to isolationism and there is much to be done to continue to engage with the country and to assist Afghans:
    a. Continued engagement with all relevant stakeholders across different levels of governance.
    b. Public engagement and disclosure on lessons learned and pathways for future support for Afghanistan.

c. Engagement with the Afghanistan diaspora on possible future aspirations for the country.
d. Continued support for Afghan refugees and evacuees residing in the United Kingdom.

2. **A pragmatic realist approach.** There needs to be an understanding that the declaration of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan means the Taliban regime is the effective government in control of the country. A 'pragmatic realist' approach to the Emirate is required from external actors in order to:

a. Provide much needed humanitarian assistance and a framework for ongoing budget support for essential imports.
b. Assist the Afghan people, many of whom have worked with external stakeholders and sacrificed so much over many years.
c. Forge diplomatic relations with allies and foes in crafting a long lasting peace in the country.
d. Leverage the international system to hold the new government to account across multiple policy domains, such as, *inter alia*:
    i. The right to education
    ii. Rights to food, health, and housing
    iii. Women's rights
    iv. Children's rights
    v. Rights to due process, habeas corpus, and the right not to be tortured or suffer inhuman or degrading treatment.
    vi. Freedom of religion, belief and thought.

3. **Close attention to regional economic and political interests.** There should be recognition of the importance of Afghanistan for proximate regional powers, including Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran, requiring:

a. Opening all diplomatic channels between and among these powers to forge a collective understanding of the challenging needs of Afghanistan.
b. Mobilizing international humanitarian assistance for the Afghan people.
c. Maintaining dialogue with China on its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and implications for Afghanistan.
d. Work with the World Bank and other development assistance providers on packages of support.
e. The international community to be able to use frozen foreign exchange assets to underpin a mechanism for ongoing support.

4. **A strong counter-terrorism response.** There should be recognition of the ongoing and deepening threat of organised terrorism in Afghanistan and its immediate neighbours, requiring:

a. Monitoring of all terrorist activity in the country.
b. Monitoring of the movement of members of external terrorist groups into Afghanistan.
c. Monitoring of ISIS-K and Al Qaeda activities in Afghanistan and the potential for spill over of these activities.
d. Work within the United Nations legal framework for countering terrorism and engaging in the use of force.

5. **A strong counter-trafficking response.** There should be recognition of the ongoing prevalence and root causes for modern slavery and human trafficking across their many forms in Afghanistan, requiring:

a. Continued advocacy around closing the implementation gap between the *de jure* protection and *de facto* realisation of human rights with respect to modern slavery and human trafficking.
b. Investment in research to better understand trafficking routes, for examples from Afghanistan to Pakistan or Iran to Turkey and then to Europe/the UK, and in humanitarian and anti-slavery NGOs working to support vulnerable Afghan refugees and migrants.
c. Monitoring of productive sectors of the Afghanistan economy that have a high probability of modern slavery and human trafficking, using Earth Observation and data analytics, in order to reduce the risk of slavery-made goods entering global supply chains.

> "Human trafficking occurs when state and non-state actors buy and sell human beings for financial profit. Unlike the use of child soldiers and acts of sex trafficking and forced marriage, instances of human trafficking did not take place in every conflict in Afghanistan. The Taliban were often the lone offender, 71 percent of the time, while the government was the sole offender in about 21 percent of cases."

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Afghanistan: Prospects and challenges

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Notes

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Afghanistan: Prospects and challenges

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Afghanistan: Prospects and challenges

Afghanistan: The population in figures

72%
poverty rates increase during 2020
from declining incomes and increasing prices of commodities

Afghanistan is among the top 10 countries
for modern slavery prevalence globally*

749,000 people
estimated to be enslaved in Afghanistan*

*Walk Free Foundation, 2018 Global Slavery Index

5.1 million
Afghan emigrants in foreign countries

Aside from conflict-induced migration, research by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has noted that Afghans are forced to migrate either internally or to countries such as Iran and Pakistan, because of natural disasters, poverty, and human trafficking

149,000
international migrants in Afghanistan
(mid-2019)

Trafficking mainly occurs internally with over
60%
of women and child trafficking taking place within Afghanistan, while cross-border trafficking accounts for 40 percent of cases

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