

Connecticut Debate Association March 4, 2023, Westhill High School

This House Would release all frozen assets to Afghanistan's central government.

Content Warning

This topic and packet concern war, religion, human rights, poverty and deprivation. If this is a concern, please do not read the packet and ask your coach to withdraw you from competition. If you debate, you are reminded to choose your words with care and respect, and to remember that advocating for a particular course of action does not mean a speaker approves or is advocating in favor of all the consequences of that course of action.

Frozen Afghan Funds Have Done Little to Sway Taliban

By [Daniella Cheslow](#) Updated Feb. 8, 2023 2:19 pm ET Wall Street Journal

U.S. dangles release of \$3.5 billion but fails to entice Islamist regime to change

When the Biden administration seized \$7 billion of Afghanistan's central bank reserves two years ago, it [set aside half for victims of the Sept. 11 attacks](#), and deposited the rest in a Swiss-based fund that it said would benefit the Afghan people.

Today, that \$3.5 billion remains frozen. The Taliban-controlled central bank says it wants the money to stabilize its crippled financial sector. In the U.S., officials close to the situation say the money hasn't been enough of an enticement to dissuade the Islamist regime from policies the U.S. and the West find objectionable.

The standoff over frozen funds [while Afghanistan sinks into penury](#) highlights the limits of U.S. influence there, despite its avowed financial might.

The U.S. and western donors to Afghanistan had hoped to use the frozen funds as a bargaining chip to entice the Taliban to change its ways, said John Sopko, the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, a watchdog that has overseen U.S. spending in Afghanistan. But hopes "came crashing down," he said.

The U.S. has stepped up [use of economic sanctions and asset seizures](#) in the past two years as a foreign-policy mechanism against Afghanistan as well as Russia. In the case of Afghanistan, those tools have so far shown little efficacy under Taliban rule—and could take years to work if they work at all, people close to the situation say.

"The U.S. and the international community need to figure out additional incentives and punitive measures to impact Taliban behavior," said Alex Zerden, a former U.S. Treasury attaché in Kabul and now a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, a think tank in Washington, D.C.

The promise of money now frozen in Switzerland has so far done little to sway the Taliban, he said.

The U.S. froze Afghanistan's central bank reserves in 2021 after the Taliban swept into Kabul and [toppled the U.S.-backed government](#).

After earmarking half the funds for Sept. 11 victims and families, the Biden administration last year sent the balance to the Bank for International Settlements in Switzerland as a gesture to demonstrate the funds were the sovereign wealth of Afghanistan. But the U.S. retained effective veto power over the newly-dubbed Afghan Fund by appointing a four-person board, none of whom represented the Taliban, and requiring that decisions be made with unanimous consent.

The U.S. said money from the Afghan Fund could be released once Kabul's central bank, Da Afghanistan Bank, showed it was independent and ready to counter money-laundering and terrorism financing.

The Taliban took some promising steps, U.S. officials said. The bank executive board approved in December some outside monitoring bankrolled by the U.S. Agency for International Development, according to a U.S. government report.

But that move was overshadowed by other developments. As deputy chief of the central bank, the Taliban has appointed an alleged terrorist financier, Ahmad Zia Agha, [who is blacklisted by the U.S.](#), the United Nations and the European Union for allegedly managing funds intended for bombs and for distributing money to Taliban commanders and associates abroad during the U.S. occupation.

Last year, a [U.S. drone assassinated](#) al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri at an apartment in central Kabul, undermining Taliban claims that it had no ties to al Qaeda leaders or their whereabouts. The Taliban has broadly backed off early promises of a moderate rule, and has banned women from most work and school, while imposing public lashings, amputations, stonings and executions.

Critics of U.S. sanctions on Afghanistan say that Washington's efforts to coerce the Taliban are punishing the country's population. Economists say a return of central-bank funds could facilitate cross-border trade, which was crippled by a deficit of cash after the U.S. departure. The World Bank estimates Afghanistan's GDP fell by close to 30% since the Taliban takeover, and the U.N. said malnutrition has reached new highs because of restrictions on banking, international sanctions, and drought and flooding that have destroyed crops.

For now, the World Bank credits a cash pipeline from U.N. agencies with stabilizing Afghanistan's currency but warns that, should payments stop, Afghanistan's anemic economic recovery could be reversed.

Meanwhile, the U.S.-appointed trustees of the fund, who include two Afghans and two officials from the U.S. and Switzerland, appear to lack a consensus on whether to disburse any money. The board, at its sole meeting in Geneva in November, agreed to

hire an external auditor and develop compliance controls, according to the U.S. Treasury. The fund's next meeting hasn't been announced.

One trustee, economist Shah Mehrabi, said he favored considering disbursements of \$80 million a month to the Afghan central bank and erecting safeguards against money laundering and terror financing. He said the money would help provide liquidity to currency markets and stability to prices in Afghanistan, which he said are "so important to the poor, it's important to women, it's important for children."

Other trustees called for more modest disbursements. One trustee, U.S. Treasury official Andrew Baukol, declined to be interviewed.

Patrick Clawson, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said that the U.S. is unlikely to influence the Taliban by dangling the seized central bank reserves. In the longer run, he said, Washington will likely try to disburse humanitarian assistance, as the U.S. does in North Korea despite sanctions.

Others warn that even humanitarian aid to Afghanistan is coming under increased scrutiny.

Mr. Sopko, the head of the watchdog agency, noted that the U.S. contributed or promised nearly \$5 billion in humanitarian aid to Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover.

"U.S. aid to Afghanistan, whether humanitarian in nature or of some other kind, may inadvertently confer legitimacy onto the Taliban, both internationally and domestically," Mr. Sopko wrote in a recent quarterly report.

"There is also no guarantee that either providing or stopping that aid will succeed in changing the Taliban's behavior."

The Biden administration frees up \$7 billion in Afghan assets frozen in the U.S.

By Leila Fadel and Naser Shahalemi National Public Radio Morning Edition **February 14, 2022**

Millions of Afghans are on the brink of starvation. NPR's Leila Fadel talks to Naser Shahalemi, founder of the group End Afghan Starvation, about how the U.S. is splitting up the Afghan assets.

LEILA FADEL, HOST: There are about \$7 billion of Afghan funds from the country's central bank frozen in the United States. Afghanistan's economy is on the verge of collapse. Inflation is soaring, and millions of Afghans are on the brink of starvation. So what's happening with that money?

On Friday, President Biden signed an executive order that would seize the Afghan assets and move half to a fund designated for humanitarian aid for Afghanistan. The administration nodded to legal wranglings with some 9/11 families pursuing claims against those assets as the reason for not trying to free the other half of Afghan funds for the Afghan people. And that decision - well, it sparked outrage.

Naser Shahalemi is the founder of an Afghan advocacy organization called End Afghan Starvation. It's been fighting to free those funds. He joins me now. Good morning.

NASER SHAHALEMI: Good morning. How are you?

FADEL: I'm doing all right. How are you doing?

SHAHALEMI: We're doing wonderful. Doing wonderful.

FADEL: So, Naser, what was your reaction to this announcement last week?

SHAHALEMI: Well, initially there was a deep amount of shock initially as we were waiting to see what would happen with the frozen funds and what the course of action was going to be from the White House. We were dismayed. We were shocked. We were appalled. We were in complete awe of what the decision was, and we hope that a better decision can come about this and this decision could get rescinded at some level.

FADEL: What would you say to the Biden administration, which is saying that this is its way of getting at least some of the money to Afghanistan?

SHAHALEMI: Yeah. I mean, the way that they divided this money was absolutely illogical because first we need to decipher who has the right to decide another country's national assets and federal reserve. The United States spent 20 years developing the federal reserve with Afghanistan, and then to, you know, dismantle it and leave it in a paralyzed state is not very copacetic for the future of Afghanistan or the economic growth of Afghanistan.

FADEL: Give us a sense of the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan right now, nearly six months since the U.S. withdrawal.

SHAHALEMI: Yeah, the humanitarian situation is horrific at this point. The majority of the people of Afghanistan are starving, and they are locked out of their funds. They cannot access their bank cards. They cannot access their bank accounts. Many of them are in a position where - that they shouldn't need to be because they do have money in the banks.

FADEL: Yeah.

SHAHALEMI: They do have the ability to take care of themselves. But because of the sanctions, they've been locked away from their own money. And if that happened in America, people would be in outrage.

FADEL: And the sanctions you refer to are the sanctions on the Taliban, which is now in control of the country. What do you say to people who say, well, if this money goes back to Afghanistan, it will just go into the hands of the Taliban?

SHAHALEMI: It's not really how it works. Ultimately, this money that was in the federal reserve of Afghanistan's central bank was there to bolster the afghani note and to keep it steady. The money is - that money is hard-earned taxpayer Afghan money that was collected over 20 years.

FADEL: Yeah.

SHAHALEMI: And that money did not come very easy. It was designed to completely help the Afghan government and to

bolster the economy. And now, to take that away, it is absolutely ridiculous because we need that money for the people of Afghanistan so they can operate and function and to operate a free enterprise and to, you know, enjoy economic growth. FADEL: We saw demonstrations over the weekend condemning this move from the administration. What were the hopes for these funds?

SHAHALEMI: The hope for these funds was that it would be returned to the people of Afghanistan and that they would be allowed to use it for economic purposes, for business, day-to-day businesses.

FADEL: Naser Shahalemi is the founder of the End Afghan Starvation group. Thank you so much for your time.

SHAHALEMI: Thank you.

Judge Rejects Bid by Sept. 11 Families to Seize Frozen Afghan Central Bank Funds

By Charlie Savage New York Times 02/21/2023

A lawyer for the lead group of victim relatives who had sought \$3.5 billion in frozen assets said they would appeal.

WASHINGTON — A federal judge in New York on Tuesday rejected the effort by relatives of victims of the Sept. 11 attacks to seize \$3.5 billion in frozen Afghan central bank funds to pay off judgment debts owed by the Taliban, dealing a sharp blow to a high-stakes bid to compensate the families for their losses in the worst terrorist attack in American history.

In a [30-page opinion](#), Judge George B. Daniels of the Southern District of New York ruled that federal courts lacked legal jurisdiction to seize the funds. He also said that awarding them to the families would be unconstitutional because it would mean effectively recognizing the militants as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

The Sept. 11 families and insurance companies “are entitled to collect on their default judgments and be made whole for the worst terrorist attack in our nation’s history, but they cannot do so with the funds of the central bank of Afghanistan,” Judge Daniels wrote.

Under federal law and the Constitution, he added, “the Taliban — not the former Islamic Republic of Afghanistan or the Afghan people — must pay for the Taliban’s liability in the 9/11 attacks.”

The ruling by Judge Daniels adopted the recommendation of a magistrate judge, Sarah Netburn, who [analyzed the matter in a report last August](#) that also found that the families were not entitled to the funds. But it left the decision to him.

Judge Daniels’s opinion was the first definitive ruling in a complex saga at the intersection of foreign policy, international economics, counterterrorism and domestic politics, a situation arising from a country being seized by a terrorist organization and left without a government that is recognized as legitimate.

In a statement, Lee Wolosky, a lawyer for the lead group of relatives who had sought those funds, said they would appeal the ruling.

“This decision deprives over 10,000 members of the 9/11 community of their right to collect compensation from the Taliban, a terrorist group which was found liable for the 9/11 attacks on America,” Mr. Wolosky said.

When the government of Afghanistan collapsed as the Taliban took over in August 2021, there was about [\\$7 billion in Afghan central bank funds](#) deposited at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. A group of Sept. 11 families that years earlier had sued the Taliban for their losses, winning a default judgment when the militants failed to show up in court, then moved to seize the funds to pay off the judgment debt.

Last February, President Biden [froze the funds](#), reserving about half to be spent on helping the Afghan people while leaving the remaining \$3.5 billion for the families to keep going after in court.

It is not clear what will happen to the \$3.5 billion the president set aside for the families to keep pursuing if their appeals ultimately fail. One possibility is that Mr. Biden or a successor could use executive power to add it to the half he set aside for Afghans and which is now controlled by a special fund in Switzerland.

The effort by the initial group of Sept. 11 families — known as the Havlish plaintiffs and represented by Mr. Wolosky’s law firm — to seize the money was disputed for several reasons.

Other plaintiff groups of Sept. 11 families sought an equal share in any proceeds, but under New York law the Havlish group, made up of about 150 people linked to 47 estates from the nearly 3,000 people killed, could get paid in full first. Ultimately, the Havlish group negotiated a deal with other groups in which they would receive a lesser share in exchange for their support. Another faction of relatives, however, joined exiled Afghans, among others, in urging the court to reject giving any of the money to Sept. 11 families. It belonged to the Afghan people, they argued, and should go toward helping them during a [humanitarian crisis](#) caused by the collapse of the country’s economy.

Agreeing with Judge Netburn’s earlier report and recommendation, Judge Daniels expressed sympathy for both the families and the people of Afghanistan suffering anew at the hands of the Taliban. But he said the law precluded the court from awarding any of the Afghan central bank funds to the Sept. 11 plaintiffs to pay the Taliban’s debts.

For one thing, he wrote, because the Afghan central bank — known as Da Afghanistan Bank, or DAB — is an instrument of a foreign state, American courts lack jurisdiction to seize its property under the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act.

While another law called the Terrorism Risk Insurance Act can make an exception to that rule when there is a judgment against a state sponsor of terrorism, he wrote, the Sept. 11 families hold judgments against the Taliban, not the sovereign nation of Afghanistan. Moreover, he noted, Afghanistan has never been designated a state sponsor of terrorism.

Even if he was wrong about that and the court did have jurisdiction over the bank and its assets, Judge Daniels wrote, the Constitution prevented him from making the necessary finding that the bank is an “agency or instrumentality” of the Taliban.

“Finding that the Taliban controls DAB or can use DAB to advance its goals implies that the Taliban is Afghanistan’s government,” he wrote. “The Constitution vests this authority to recognize governments in the executive branch alone.”

Releasing US\$9.5 billion in frozen assets can’t help the Afghan people as long as the Taliban remain in power

By Weeda Mehran The Conversation December 16, 2021 11.09am EST

Afghanistan is in a major humanitarian crisis: the health sector is failing, the economy is collapsing, and amid the COVID pandemic, famine is inflicting ever-larger numbers of casualties. According to the most recent report by the UN World Food Programme, more than half of the resident population of 38 million are facing acute hunger and 3.2 million children under five suffer from malnutrition.

Droughts, combined with the suspension of foreign aid in the aftermath of the Taliban’s takeover, have led to a dire economic situation, with recent reports indicating that some families in the northwest are selling their children out of desperation. Food and fuel prices are soaring.

On October 17, the Taliban foreign minister, Amir Khan Mottaqi, called on the US Congress to ease sanctions and release Afghanistan’s reserves. But would the US\$9.5 billion (£7.16 billion) of frozen assets of Afghanistan Central Bank do anything to alleviate the deeply rooted poverty and food insecurity of the Afghan people – or will this only benefit the Taliban and its fighters?

Even in the near term, this amount of money will not go far to address poverty in Afghanistan. It has been estimated the reserves would cover the import costs of Afghanistan for only 15 months. The US-backed regime’s budget estimate for the fiscal year 2020 was \$6.22 billion.

The situation has been made worse by several other factors: drought, dependency on international aid and high unemployment rates. These extend far deeper and beyond the reach anything \$9.5 billion could achieve. International aid made up about 75% of the US-backed regime’s budget. Afghanistan’s assets are only a fraction of the aid the country needs.

Skills deficit

It is naive to think that the Taliban’s caretaker cabinet and its civil service is able to administer these funds efficiently. The Taliban’s leadership lacks the knowledge, skill and experience needed to run state institutions and deliver services while managing an unfolding humanitarian crisis against the backdrop of a pandemic.

The skills that helped the Taliban win on the battlefield are not easily transferable. And more than half of the Taliban’s caretaker cabinet is on at least one designated terrorist list, which makes diplomatic engagement with the Taliban very difficult at the international level. At home, the Taliban leadership suffers from internal fragmentation that makes agreement on national-level public policy decisions difficult.

At the sub-national level, the Taliban has placed fighters in upper-level administration positions, while thousands of former government employees have either left their jobs or have been replaced with Taliban loyalists, according to my anonymous sources still living there. Women, who previously made up almost half of the civil service, have been almost entirely excluded. Taliban fighters placed at executive administrative levels lack the required managerial and leadership skills – some reportedly even lack basic literacy. The prospects of these people having the capacity to put the funds to productive use addressing the abject poverty in the country is very low.

Additionally, fears of misappropriation of National Bank’s assets are well-grounded. The limited international aid that has reached Afghanistan has occasionally been misappropriated and distributed among the Taliban fighters.

These concerns become all the more relevant given that the Taliban is not able to pay its fighters. The group has about 80,000 fighters who were paid 10,000-25,000 Afghanis (the equivalent of US\$200-US\$400) per month before the group took over Kabul. At the lower end, the Taliban needs at least \$16m a month for the salaries of its fighters alone. Some of the Taliban’s fighters have reportedly defected to IS or al-Qaeda. The Taliban will undoubtedly lose more if it prioritises civilian spending over paying its fighters.

Political considerations

Finally, the release of Afghanistan’s foreign assets is tied to the question of the Taliban’s legitimacy. No government so far – including staunch supporter Pakistan – has officially recognised the Taliban’s government. Freezing Afghanistan’s assets was a political decision by US president Joe Biden to put pressure on the Taliban to form an inclusive government, so releasing these assets to the Taliban is akin to formal recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Even if it was released for entirely humanitarian reasons, the Taliban would not hesitate to make this into a propaganda coup.

Economic sanctions have been effective in some regards. The Taliban is realising that its survival depends on changing its policies, both regarding women’s rights and forming an inclusive government. The opening of schools for girls in cities such as Herat and Mazar-e Sharif is indicative of the effectiveness of pressure put on the Taliban both internationally and nationally.

But economic sanctions also have a dire impact on the civilian population. Although the UN raised \$1.2bn in emergency funds, the international community is grappling with how to engage with the Taliban, deliver the much-needed aid – and

yet not empower, legitimise and enrich the Taliban. Helping Afghans while bypassing the Taliban is possible. Unicef, for example, is setting up a system that will allow direct payment to teachers while bypassing the Taliban.

Afghanistan's state power monopoly owes more than \$90 million to its power suppliers in neighbouring countries such as Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Given the deteriorating relationships between the Taliban and some of these countries, there are concerns that the suppliers might cut off electricity. International aid could be used to pay foreign electricity suppliers directly while denying the Taliban the opportunity to misappropriate funds.

Afghan civilians should not be subjected to starvation in a bid to pressure a government they did not put in office.

Likewise, the international community has a responsibility to ensure the wealth of the Afghan people is not squandered by shortsighted Taliban desperately trying to cling to power.

Report highlights multiple human rights violations and abuses under Taliban

United Nations News 20 July 2022

A [new report](#) from the UN Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) released on Wednesday, confirms the erosion of basic human rights across the country since the Taliban takeover in August last year, pointing out they bear responsibility for extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrests and detentions, and violations of fundamental freedoms.

The UNAMA findings, confirm many of the concerns voiced over the direction of human rights under the Taliban 11 months ago, after foreign forces pulled-out and the elected government collapsed.

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While the de facto authorities have taken some steps aimed at improving the human rights situation, the report documents a range of human rights violations -- arbitrary arrests, detentions, torture, excessive use of force & extrajudicial killings.

Crackdown

The de facto authorities have limited dissent by cracking down on protests and curbing media freedoms according to the report. The report condemns arbitrary arrests of journalists, protestors, and civil society activists.

“The rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of expression and freedom of opinion, are not only fundamental freedoms, they are necessary for the development and progression of a nation”, said Fiona Frazer, UNAMA Chief of Human Rights.

They allow meaningful debate to flourish, also benefiting those who govern by allowing them to better understand the issues and problems facing the population.”

Erosion of women's rights

Eleven months after Afghanistan's abrupt transition to Taliban rule, the erosion of women's rights is one of the most notable aspects of the de facto administration to date.

Women and girls have seen their rights to access education, the workplace and participate in public life, restricted. Not allowing girls to go to secondary school means that a generation of girls will not complete their full 12 years of basic education, UNAMA highlighted.

“Education is not only a basic human right, but the key to the development of a nation,” said Markus Potzel, the UN acting Special Representative for Afghanistan.

'Beyond time'

“It is beyond time for all Afghans to be able to live in peace and rebuild their lives after 20 years of armed conflict”, he added. “Our monitoring reveals that despite the improved security situation since 15 August, the people of Afghanistan, in particular women and girls, are deprived of the full enjoyment of their human rights”.

While the report acknowledges steps taken by Taliban authorities to reduce violence, UNAMA still recorded 2,106 civilian casualties, with 700 killed, and 1,406 wounded. Those casualties are mainly attributed to targeted attacks by the terrorist group which identifies itself as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province, against ethnic and religious minority communities.

Impunity

UNAMA is concerned about the impunity with which members of the de facto authorities appear to have carried out human rights violations.

According to the report, those worst affected, were those linked to the former government and its security forces, with 160 extrajudicial killings confirmed, as well as 178 arbitrary arrests and detentions, and 56 instances of torture.

The human rights situation has been exacerbated by a nationwide economic, financial and humanitarian crisis of unprecedented scale. At least 59 per cent of the population is now in need of humanitarian assistance – an increase of six million people compared with the beginning of 2021.

Report says donors 'turning away' from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan

Al Jazeera Staff 23 Feb 2023

A new report by Crisis Group warns against international donors cutting aid to Afghanistan in the wake of the Taliban's curbs on [women's education and ability to work at NGOs](#), instead arguing for Western countries to find a “liminal space between pariah and legitimate status” to respond to the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

The report, released on Thursday, focused primarily on two Taliban edicts announced in December – the first suspending

female education at private and public universities, and the second banning Afghan women from [working at local and international NGOs](#). The moves led to protests and [global condemnation](#), while sounding a possible death knell for the Taliban's initial openness to engage with the international community following its takeover of the country in August 2021. Accompanying the Taliban's clampdown has been a reassessment of international aid from key international government donors, according to the report's authors. That aid, despite being immediately paused in the wake of the group's rise to power, had resumed amid concerns over widespread hunger and poverty in the country of about 40 million.

"Donors are turning away from Afghanistan, disgusted by the Taliban's restrictions on women's basic freedoms," Graeme Smith, Crisis Group's Senior Consultant on Afghanistan, said in a statement accompanying the report. "However, cutting aid to send a message about women's rights will only make the situation worse for all Afghans," he added. "The most principled response to the Taliban's misogyny would be finding ways to mitigate the harms inflicted on women and other vulnerable groups."

The report – which drew on dozens of interviews with "Afghan and international women activists, current and former Afghan officials, teachers, students, aid workers, human rights defenders, development officials, diplomats, business leaders and other interlocutors" – noted Western governments in the second half of 2022 warned aid agencies of a growing sense of donor fatigue towards Afghanistan. It did not name the governments to which it referred.

The authors further warned that following the most recent rights rollbacks, "many Western politicians fear voters will not accept the idea of their taxes helping a country ruled by an odious regime," while adding that "consultations in January 2023 among major donors produced initial thinking that aid should be trimmed back to send a message to the Taliban, although the governments involved did not agree on which budgets to cut".

Again, the report did not name the countries in question.

Western threats

The United Nations, which has already had to [roll back some aid operations](#) in the wake of the ban on NGO workers, has appealed for \$4.6bn to aid Afghanistan. The sum is the [largest request for a single country](#) ever. The UN has warned that 28 million people are in need of humanitarian aid, accounting for two-thirds of the country's population.

But Crisis Group warned that "Western governments seemed poised to fall significantly short" of that appeal.

The report authors added that options discussed in the wake of the December edict have included "deepening sanctions, cutting aid or levying other forms of punishment in response".

They noted that the G7 grouping of the world's most wealthy countries had [said](#) there would be "consequences for how our countries engage with the Taliban" in the wake of the December edicts. The grouping had provided \$3bn in humanitarian funding for Afghanistan in 2022, the report noted.

In the United States, which imposed a raft of new sanctions on the Taliban in October over their treatment of women, Secretary of State [Antony Blinken said](#): "There are going to be costs if this is not reversed".

The report's authors argued any approach that included short-term cuts to aid in the hopes of undermining the Taliban's authority would further harm those targeted by the Taliban's recent moves.

"Testing such assumptions would involve a high-stakes gamble with potentially millions of human lives. Win or lose, the costs of taking the gamble would be paid in large part by Afghan women, as the burdens of the crisis fall disproportionately on them," the report said.

It noted that "women and girls often get the smallest share of food in Afghan families, which means that in times of scarcity they are most vulnerable to malnutrition and disease", while child marriages tend to increase during times of increased hardship.

Change of approach

Instead, Crisis Group argued that continuing to offer humanitarian aid, while supporting longer-term development aid, would address the population's immediate needs, while undermining the "Taliban's overheated rhetoric about a titanic clash between Islam and the West".

The authors further cautioned against expecting outside pressure to change the Taliban's approach, highlighting the opaque nature of the group's decision-making. They noted its reclusive leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, has appeared to insist on the strict measures out of "personal conviction and to assert his authority over the movement and the country".

"As the world considers its options, the idea of coaxing the Taliban into behaving like an internationally acceptable government should be set aside for the moment," the report said.

There is little room for opposing views within the Taliban leadership, it added, and influence from outside Muslim figures has proven ineffective as "the Taliban's policies are drawn not only from their atypical interpretation of Islam, but also from aspects of local culture".

Meanwhile, political talks with the Taliban aimed at creating a "roadmap" to normalisation have all but stalled. It also remains unclear how much money the group may be earning from narcotics and other forms of smuggling, bringing into question how much sanctions will actually affect the upper echelons of leadership.

"Western policymakers must stand up for Afghan women and girls. At the same time, they should be careful to avoid self-defeating policies," the report concluded.

"Practical steps that materially benefit Afghan women, improving their lives in tangible ways, would be superior to angry denunciations of the Taliban's wrongheadedness."

The authors added: “The Taliban should find a better way of making decisions, instead of following the whims of a leader who has proven his determination to oppress women and block the rebuilding of his country. Until that happens, the future of Afghanistan looks bleak.”

Winter has come for Afghanistan

[Ishaan Tharoor](#), Washington Post, January 30, 2023

For much of the past year, the West’s policymakers and analysts were possessed by one haunting question: How bad will Europe’s winter be? Energy prices on the continent surged because of the war in Ukraine and sanctions on Russia’s energy industry. The prospect of a deep cold spell as European governments rationed gas supplies [conjured images of a bleak winter](#) from Lviv to London, with industry going dark and pensioners [scavenging for firewood](#).

Instead, parts of the continent recently experienced record warm temperatures, which lowered energy demand and allowed national utility companies to [fill their natural gas storage facilities](#) to the brim. The worst did not come to pass: Russia’s leverage over Europe did not perceptibly grow, nor did public fatigue over Europe’s commitment to Ukraine’s war effort dent the resolve of its national governments.

But consider another part of the world that has receded from the West’s attention over the course of the Ukraine conflict. Afghanistan is currently in the grips of its worst winter in more than a decade. Temperatures recently [plunged](#) to below minus-34 degrees Celsius (minus-29.2 degrees Fahrenheit). Officials in the local Taliban government said the cold has been lethal, leading to more than 160 deaths over the span of about two weeks, and killing more than 70,000 livestock.

My colleague Sammy Westfall [noted the details at the end of last week](#): “Of the 162 people who have died because of the cold weather since Jan. 10, more than half died in the past week, said Shafiullah Rahimi, a spokesman for the Ministry of Disaster Management, [Reuters reported](#) Thursday. Afghans have been dying of hypothermia, as well as carbon monoxide poisoning and gas leakage, amid a widespread lack of heating systems, local outlet Tolo News [reported](#).” The death toll is expected to rise as communities in rural areas dig themselves out of the snow.

The dismal conditions have struck a society ill-equipped to cope. Afghanistan is already buckling under the stress of a [rolling humanitarian crisis](#), triggered by years of drought and the economic implosion that followed the Taliban’s takeover in 2021. The country’s foreign reserves are frozen by U.S. sanctions; its banking system has collapsed, partially due to the disappearance of foreign aid; and the price of ordinary goods — including firewood and coal — have skyrocketed. Two-thirds of the country’s 40 million people will likely require humanitarian assistance of some form in 2023, including some 15 million children. Roughly half the country may face acute food insecurity.

Afghanistan imports the bulk of its electricity from its neighbors and the country is accustomed to shortages and power cuts. But the blackouts this winter have proved all the more miserable, forcing families in some instances to choose between feeding themselves or trying to keep warm. Many are struggling to do either.

“If we buy coal and wood, then we won’t be able to buy food,” a woman named Maryam in Samangan province, north of the Hindu Kush mountain range, [told Al Jazeera](#). “This is the coldest winter of my life, and I don’t know how we will survive it without food or heat.”

Sharafuddin, a resident of the city of Herat, told Radio Azadi last week: “During the cold nights, we are awake with our children and cannot sleep. It is already midday, and I have neither had breakfast nor drank tea. ... I’m sitting here praying to God.”

The country’s hospitals are “on life support,” [according to the International Committee of the Red Cross](#). A health worker in Kabul [described to the New Humanitarian](#) what happened when her clinic had to turn off its generator after continuous use: “We had to shut it for two hours, and we told the mothers to find a way to warm their newborns. If we kept them in the incubators without electricity they would freeze. If we took them out, they could have problems breathing.”

The difficulty of the situation is exacerbated by the defiance and extremism of the Taliban authorities. Since seizing power 18 months ago, the fundamentalist Islamist movement has set about reversing the legacy of two decades of U.S.-backed government, banning girls from secondary schools, then universities and most recently barring women from working in domestic or foreign-backed nongovernment organizations, many of which are instrumental in delivering what meager aid is available to the Afghan public.

The Taliban, whose pariah government in Kabul is not recognized by the international community, has shown little inclination to bend to either local or outside anger over these discriminatory moves. Individual governments, even those that have a long history of dealings with the Taliban, like Qatar and Pakistan, claim to have little leverage over the factions of the Taliban dictating policy on the ground in Afghanistan. The United States has [limited diplomatic tools](#) beyond more targeted sanctions to place more pressure on the Taliban.

U.N. officials have pressed the Taliban to allow exemptions for female workers in the health nongovernmental organizations, a concession that shows it’s possible to chip away at the Islamists’ entrenched position. “We have not seen the history of the Taliban reversing any edict,” U.N. Deputy Secretary General Amina Mohammed [told reporters](#) after visiting the country earlier this month. “What we have seen is exemptions that, hopefully, if we keep pushing them, they will water down those edicts to a point where we will get women and girls back into school and into the workplace.” She [added](#) that “a lot of what we have to deal with is how we travel the Taliban from the 13th century to the 21st. And that’s, that’s a journey.”

Martin Griffiths, the U.N.’s humanitarian chief who also recently traveled to Afghanistan, said it was important for his

organization and other agencies to be able to work with women and necessary for the Taliban to make “practical exceptions” given the circumstances.

“We don’t have time,” [Griffiths said](#). “The winter is with us, people are dying, famine is looming.”

China is extending its dealings with the Taliban as it increases its superpower status

The Conversation Jose Caballero February 2, 2023

China is one of the few countries that is committed to expanding its dealings with the Taliban government in Afghanistan, where it hopes to expand its use of the vast natural resources while also improving its own geopolitical security.

In mid-2021 [China welcomed a Taliban delegation](#), showing its willingness to recognise the Taliban government as the US signalled [its planned withdrawal](#). In early January 2023, a Chinese firm agreed to sign a 25-year contract for [oil extraction in Afghanistan](#). There is also the possibility that a Chinese state-owned company will be contracted to operate [a copper mine in the country](#).

It is unsurprising that as western countries withdraw almost all their links with Afghanistan, China is willing to increase its commercial presence in the country. Although traditionally its Afghan policy has not been a [diplomatic priority](#), it now sees opportunities.

Despite being one of Afghanistan’s [largest foreign investors](#) in the past and its strategic partner, China’s involvement in the country has previously been relatively limited when compared with others such as Russia and the US.

Arguably, its policy in regard to Afghanistan has been driven [by domestic economic interests and security issues](#). However, in the last decade or so, China has adopted a more assertive foreign policy. At the same time, commercial interests have also led to increased Chinese involvement in Afghanistan.

Useful natural resources

Greater active engagement with Afghanistan will enable China to benefit in several ways. Afghanistan is one of the world’s most [resource-rich countries](#), but its security conditions have constrained the development of the sector.

[Some estimates](#) set the value of Afghanistan’s untapped mineral deposits, such as copper, iron and lithium, at £811.5 billion. In terms of crude oil, it has 1.6 billion barrels. As for natural gas, Afghanistan possesses 16 trillion cubic feet, and has access to 500 million barrels of natural gas liquids.

However, in the past, Chinese activities in Afghanistan’s mineral sector have stalled. In the late 2010s, for example, security concerns [hindered the activities of Chinese enterprises](#) tapping into the country’s mineral resources.

Useful Afghan resources

There is another related gain in working with the Afghan natural resources sector. China’s domestic [energy supply](#) is limited both by geology and [energy density](#), and its dependence on other countries leads to “[energy security anxieties](#)”.

Access to Afghanistan’s natural resources, then, not only provides economic incentives for China to increase its commercial presence in the country. It also has the potential to help ease its growing demand for energy.

Increasing involvement in Afghanistan falls within China’s [prioritisation of short-term energy security](#). But it can become a fundamental strategic element for its long-term energy requirements.

Afghanistan’s fragile internal security has [affected China in two ways](#). First, it worried that years of [instability in Afghanistan](#) would spill over into China’s Xinjiang autonomous territory, where there is a long history of religious and ethnic tension with Beijing. This has included [crackdowns](#) by Beijing on the Muslim Uyghur people, and widespread accusations of extensive human rights abuses.

Second, the instability that stems from Afghanistan negatively affects the development of China’s [Belt and Road Initiative](#) (BRI), which is building trade routes with the rest of the world, because two of its fundamental corridors run adjacent to Afghanistan. As a global infrastructure and development investment plan encompassing over 60 countries (although there is no official count), including some from east Asia and Europe, [the initiative](#) is a vehicle to expand China’s global economic and political influence. Such an expansion is paramount for China’s superpower aspirations.

Trade frictions with the US and other countries have increased the pressure to open other markets for China’s goods. The BRI is an effective channel to [develop new export markets](#) which can alleviate trade pressures. And although the Afghan consumer market is small, it is [an untapped market for Chinese goods](#) – particularly those produced in China’s western regions.

Building superpower status

An additional gain is geopolitical. After decades of hegemonic presence “next door” but a degree of reluctance to get involved in Afghan affairs, China seems to be somewhat ready to fill the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of western countries. Greater presence in Afghanistan provides China with an opportunity to strengthen its regional power and influence. In doing so, it can contribute to the stability of Afghanistan. In turn, such a role will improve [China’s image](#) as a responsible rising power.

So far, China has been [reluctant to take on a security role](#) in Afghanistan, because this could have led to friction with other countries and increased its exposure to threats by international terrorists networks. However, a change in strategy to increase the economic stability of Afghanistan can contribute to the reduction of China’s own security vulnerabilities.
