

Opinion **Afghanistan**

Engagement with Afghanistan will promote broader US strategic goals

A well co-ordinated international effort is needed to address Taliban misrule and help the Afghan people

ANNIE PFORZHEIMER ✓ Added

Feedback

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Taliban members stop women protesting in Kabul in October last year © Bulent Kilic/AFP/Getty Images

Since the Taliban’s violent takeover of Afghanistan one year ago, the country’s 40mn inhabitants have faced a hellish existence of political repression and economic crisis.

For the US and other allies that supported Afghan progress for 20 years, this nightmare scenario prompts the question: how do we help relieve the immense suffering of Afghans after abandoning them and surrendering most of the levers of influence we previously wielded?

To begin with, we must remain engaged with, if not in, Afghanistan. That requires facing up to our painful role in enabling last year’s traumatic turn of events. That history is something Americans want to forget, and the Taliban’s active repression of media and human rights defenders make it hard for even the closest observers to see the full extent of their iron rule.

We have a moral obligation to the Afghan people we left behind to endure the rule of the Taliban. We also have a strategic self-interest in preventing Afghanistan from becoming, once again, a destabilised environment where terror groups freely live, train and recruit.

Moving ahead, our engagement should be multilateral, principled and clear in its application. Having an ‘ideology’ is not only the Taliban’s prerogative. We should fight without reservation for the essence of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights

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The era of unilateral US policy leadership on Afghanistan is over. The UN, World Bank and Asian Development Bank are examples of the appropriate faces of international community involvement with Afghanistan. Imperfect as these institutions are, they at least represent broad world opinion and include Afghanistan’s neighbours and other regional actors. The US is, admirably, the top financial donor to Afghanistan, but it is not now in a position to cut the best deals. The US should therefore get out of the way of those who can make effective contributions. It must throw its weight behind a well co-ordinated international effort.

We also have to stick to our principles as indivisible elements of policy. Having an “ideology” is not only the Taliban’s prerogative. We should fight without reservation for the essence of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Afghanistan signed decades ago and which calls for respect for human rights, freedom from fear and individual liberty.

Finally, Afghanistan has to be clearly linked to, and nested within, broader US strategic goals. Beyond the siloed and unworkable vision from the past of either total success or complete policy failure in Afghanistan alone, we should incorporate it back into our other international imperatives.

These include stability in the nuclear-armed neighbourhood of south Asia, counterbalancing Chinese and Russian influence in central Asia, worldwide counter-terrorism co-operation, atrocity prevention, global principles of women’s rights, peace and security, and diversification of mineral and energy sources.

To achieve these ends, we should match our remaining tools of influence in Afghanistan as precisely as possible to the outcomes we want.

Getting the Taliban to respect human rights in Afghanistan should be coupled with a range of diplomatic tools that measure out the legitimacy it wants. We should provide the Taliban with neither bilateral diplomatic recognition nor a UN seat until they honour international human rights norms. A recent UN report that spelt out appalling violations of human rights in Afghanistan suggests that the Taliban are frighteningly far from meeting that goal.

Counter-terrorism and stability goals are best matched to tools like the current UN sanctions regime, aimed at mitigating the rise of terror groups. Not only should we deny any sanctions relief until the Taliban truly address the issues of terrorism and national inclusion, we should consider additional sanctions against those who are creating suicide units within the security forces and recruitment-focused madrassas to take the place of schools.

As for the sorely needed goal of putting Afghanistan’s severely broken economy back on track, our efforts must be matched with Taliban acceptance of the international community’s oversight of cash assistance and release of frozen assets. There also needs to be transparency about where their own funding comes from and how they spend it.

We have a mess to clean up in Afghanistan. And it is in our interest to do so as a part of the larger world system, with principles guiding our actions, and by advancing our broader international security agenda.

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