[**Moment of truth**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1644789/moment-of-truth)

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HISTORY has come full circle in Afghanistan with the Taliban regaining power after 20 years of war. In post-America Afghanistan the Taliban face a number of critical tests — of governance, preventing economic collapse, addressing a worsening humanitarian situation and containing terrorist groups that reside there.

Taliban leaders have to deal with both the urgent and important. The security challenge is among the most urgent because all else is contingent on this even though the multiple challenges they have to negotiate are interconnected and must be tackled simultaneously. The Taliban control more of the country now than they did when they were previously in power. That makes establishing durable order and lasting peace much harder. The [stand-off in Panjsher](https://www.dawn.com/news/1644658/taliban-opposition-fight-for-afghan-holdout-province-of-panjshir-as-top-us-general-warns-of-civil-war) with elements of the Northern Alliance has yet to end as talks have apparently failed.

**Editorial**: [*The West must not insist that Afghanistan be remade in its image in order to recognise the Taliban*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1644580/taliban-recognition)

Political consolidation will obviously depend on how effectively the Taliban are able to govern. After two decades of fighting this is an uphill task especially as the requirements of governance have changed fundamentally since the 1990s, as have people’s expectations. The exodus of hundreds of government employees from the country adds to the governing difficulties.

The Taliban will also be under global pressure to deliver on their promise to ensure that Afghan soil is not used to attack other countries. The most important ‘ask’ from the international community is for them to contain if not demobilise violent groups based in Afghanistan. Taliban spokesmen have offered assurances they will not allow their country to be used by these groups. But words have to translate into deeds. The concern of neighbouring states and the wider international community is over the possibility of a permissive environment taking hold which enables these groups to flourish. The Taliban government’s ability to deliver on their commitment will be important to secure international acceptability.

The Taliban face many tests — of governance, averting economic collapse and containing terrorist groups.

The international community has also insisted on the establishment of an inclusive government. Whether or not the government formed by the Taliban will be deemed ‘inclusive’ enough, international engagement with the Taliban is expected to continue. That will be important to encourage the Taliban to run the country by reaching out to other groups and accommodating others.

The most urgent challenge confronting the Taliban is to prevent state collapse that can be triggered by the dire economic situation. Money has to be found to pay the salaries of government personnel, who haven’t been paid for months and to run basic public services. The financial crunch has been compounded by the freezing of funds by Washington, as most of Afghanistan’s foreign reserves lie abroad including in US banks. The IMF and World Bank are said to have withheld assistance and paused projects at Washington’s behest. Doubts have also been voiced over American funding for UN agencies engaged in humanitarian and development work.

All of this places great pressure on a new government that has to deal with a war-ravaged country, rising prices, shortage of cash available to citizens and the risk of the economic crunch exacerbating a growing humanitarian crisis. UN Secretary General António Guterres has already warned of an impending “humanitarian catastrophe” with half the population needing assistance. The UN is set to convene a humanitarian conference on Sept 13 to raise much-needed funds.

The US is evidently using economic tools to pressure the Taliban to meet both their short-term (safe passage for its nationals and partners) and longer-term demands (no terrorist sanctuary) and to abide by their international obligations. US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan recently said the Taliban should cooperate in view of American influence over Afghanistan’s “relationship with the international financial system, its access to any kind of reserves and resources”. In his end-of-mission speech President Joe Biden also referred to Washington’s leverage in this regard without however elaborating.

The Taliban are keen on getting international recognition and legitimacy, signalling this repeatedly in their statements. They know access to funds and future assistance is contingent on recognition, which in turn depends on implementing their promises including respect for human rights. So long as the international community stays united and sends a common message to the Taliban there are reasonable chances that they will comply with most commitments. It is one thing to test the Taliban’s intentions by collective pressure but if Western countries, make excessive demands — so-called benchmarks — or use blunt instruments of economic coercion it will prove counterproductive. It could even have the unintended consequence of contributing over time to economic, even state collapse. Humanitarian assistance in any case should not be made conditional.

There is international consensus today on core ‘asks’ of the Taliban on counterterrorism and human and women’s rights. But the consensus could fray. An early indication of this came in last month’s meeting of the UN Security Council when a draft resolution on Afghanistan was hastily pushed through by Western members. This prompted Russia and China to abstain. The resolution was adopted but laid bare differences in approach among the P5. In his statement explaining why he abstained the Russian envoy said the resolution failed to name IS-K and ETIM, ignored the “negative impact” of evacuating Afghan nationals in contributing to a brain drain and failed to mention the adverse effects of freezing Afghan financial assets. The Chinese ambassador also objected to the haste in moving the resolution and criticised the assets freeze. And he urged engagement with the Taliban.

With another meeting coming up of the Security Council on Sept 27 to renew the mandate of UNAMA (UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan), it is important for its members to maintain a common approach. Renewal of travel exemptions given to several Taliban leaders from UN sanctions will also be considered this month by the relevant Security Council committee.

Afghanistan’s precarious economic and humanitarian situation is a compelling reason for the international community to constructively engage with Kabul because the alternative can yield an outcome that will not serve regional or international peace and stability. Above all, it would compound the plight of the Afghan people who have already suffered so much.

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*Published in Dawn, September 6th, 2021*