**Afghanistan: China and Pakistan are on the Right Track**

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Recently, in response to the Taliban reneging on their promises of upholding human rights, the UN convened in Doha, Qatar, to discuss with the “international community how to engage with the Taliban” on issues including human rights, in particular women’s rights, inclusive governance, counter-terrorism and drug trafficking.

This summit on Afghanistan and Afghan women comprised 21 countries and two organisations (the EU and the Organisation of Islamic Organisation) but ironically did not include a single representative from either the Taliban or Afghan women. Suhail Shaheen, the Taliban’s Head of the Political Office in Doha retorted, “How will they implement decisions while we are not part of it? Issues can only be solved through a pragmatic approach, not one-sided decisions.”

It is not often that I agree with the Taliban, but in this instance, I strongly believe that excluding the Taliban from talks on Afghanistan is unproductive. In stark contrast, the dialogue held between the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan and Afghanistan only a few days after the UN summit is far more productive. Understandably, the international community is furious at the Taliban for reneging on their promises. However, ceasing communication, humanitarian and economic assistance, and imposing sanctions on Afghanistan does nothing to resolve the problem. “The economic base determines the superstructure.” In China, there is a popular saying, “Development is the key to resolving all problems.” Indeed, those who sincerely wish to address the human rights problem in Afghanistan need to realise that the root cause of the problem is that Afghanistan is poverty-stricken.

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Before the Taliban had taken over Afghanistan in 2021, financial assistance from the US and other international donors comprised 2/3 of Afghanistan’s annual budget. Even discounting the rampant corruption plaguing Afghanistan, for the Afghan economy to stay afloat required a considerable amount of foreign assistance. Thus, it is not surprising that once the financial assistance has stopped, the Afghan economy is on the verge of collapse, and the Taliban regime is unable to provide necessities such as food and health services to the people of Afghanistan.

According to the UN, 97% of Afghans live below the poverty line.

Consequently, this resulted in a surge of terrorist activities in Afghanistan, which spilt over into nearby countries. In 2022, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed in a US drone attack in Kabul. Confirming that the Taliban have violated the Doha Accord by harbouring terrorists, Afghanistan had once again become a haven for terrorist organisations. Currently, between 8,000 and 10,000 foreign terrorist fighters reside in Afghanistan. Tehrik-e Taliban (TTP), East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Daesh-Khorasan Province (Daesh-K), and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) are once again gaining momentum. According to the UN, Daesh-K had witnessed a 200% increase in recruits over merely half a year, and TTP had become “more cohesive, presenting a greater threat in the region.” Encouraged by the Taliban’s success, they have increased their attacks by 50% since the Taliban takeover.

Addressing terrorism and other issues, such as the illicit drugs trade or the Taliban’s violation of human rights, requires talking with them, no matter how frustrating it might be. Talking with the Taliban is the only way to ensure peace and stability in the region. It is the only way to identify overlapping interests with the Taliban, such as economic development, and ways to actualise them.

The saying “sticks and carrots” implies that punishments should be used in conjunction with rewards. Punishing the Taliban by not recognising it as a full member of the international community should suffice. Turning Afghanistan into a “hermit kingdom” is excessive. The Taliban’s human rights violation is not just because of the Taliban leadership’s extreme interpretation of Islam, the vast majority of Afghans live in the countryside, being impoverished and uneducated, they are conservatives just like the Taliban.

Even without the Taliban in power or the Ministry of Vice and Virtue to enforce rules, they would not have had their daughters attend school. For the situation to improve once and for all requires temporarily placing aside our differences and instead, prioritise rebuilding post-war Afghanistan, because those differences will dissipate once Afghanistan’s economy gets back on track.

According to the Afghanistan Analysts Network, senior Taliban officials located in Qatar are sending their daughters to school despite them banning girls from receiving education in Afghanistan. Some Taliban ministers have even displayed a preference for marrying well-educated women, arguing that these women “know the rights of their husband better and can train their children better.”

This is a positive development, proving that given enough exposure to modernity, given enough wealth and education, even the Taliban will abandon their fanaticism in favour of secularism.

The international community should continue to engage in dialogues with the Taliban, and convince the Taliban to look at countries that follow a more moderate interpretation of Islam, such as Pakistan or the Gulf States for example. These countries are perfect examples that secularisation does not mean the complete abandonment of Islamic values and local customs. There is a middle path, a Goldilocks zone. A zone that is neither “too hot” nor “too cold,” but “just right.”

However, encouraging the Taliban to adopt a more moderate interpretation of Islam cannot be achieved if countries such as the US continue to shirk their duties. Since the US is primarily responsible for the destruction of Afghanistan, it should be responsible for the reconstruction of post-war Afghanistan. Instead, not only did the US freeze 7 billion US Dollars of Afghan assets, it also ceased all contact with the Taliban, and imposed economic sanctions on Afghanistan. It has been proven that economic sanctions are ineffective and counterintuitive, hurting only the local populace, and strengthening the popularity of the sanctioned government.

How can women’s rights improve in Afghanistan if its people live on less than 2 dollars per day?

How can it improve if the Afghan people continue to be deprived of all the comforts associated with modernity? How can it improve if the majority of Afghans are illiterate and uneducated, and can only turn to religious fundamentalism to keep them afloat in a sea of despair? How can the illicit drug trade be eradicated if there are no jobs that can bring in the same level of income as growing poppy? If the US seriously cares about the people of Afghanistan, if it believes what it preaches, then the US should stop shedding “crocodile tears,” or try to prove to itself that it has the moral high ground. Instead, the US should talk with the Taliban on how to rebuild Afghanistan.

Recently, in an ironic turn of events, the Taliban killed the Daesh-K leader responsible for the killing of 13 American soldiers at the Kabul International Airport back in 2021.

This suggests that Taliban and American interests do converge at times. This a perfect opportunity and the US should capitalise on this and offer to the Taliban to fight this common enemy together, once having gained the Taliban’s trust, then the US could discuss with the Taliban the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Yes, the Taliban is not exactly a paradigm of human rights. Yes, there is an immense canyon of ideological difference between the Taliban and the rest of the world, but as unappealing as the idea of cooperating with them might be, the US need to realise that after a protracted war and a failed regime change, the Taliban are here to stay. Besides, compared with the previous Ghani regime, which is corrupt, unpopular and ineffectual, the Taliban has better control over Afghanistan, and could more effectively enforce its rules beyond Kabul, they just need to be guided in the right direction.

However, the international community needs to be aware that talks should not be limited to the government in Kabul. The Taliban is not a unified group, it suffers from internal rivalry and factionalism. Currently, the Taliban is divided between the Kandahari group based in Kandahar led by Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Ghani Baradar, and the Haqqani group based in Kabul led by Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani.

It has become evident that Kandahar – the birthplace of the Taliban movement, has become the de facto capital of Afghanistan, not only because the Taliban Supreme Leader Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada resides in the city, but because the Taliban’s Chief Spokesperson has also been relocated there recently.

This is further complicated by the fact that Afghanistan does not so much resemble a Westphalian nation-state, but rather, it is a loose confederation of 60 tribes, with over 400 subdivisions. To the members of these tribes, loyalty to one’s tribe is more important than to one’s country.

Therefore, efforts should be made to talk with all parties in Afghanistan, since the central government in Kabul has only nominal control over Afghanistan, and it is difficult for outside observers to predict which group will be in power in a few years.

In the joint statement between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan after the three countries’ foreign ministers had convened in Islamabad. China and Pakistan reiterated their belief that reconstruction and economic development should be prioritised in Afghanistan and that countries should lift their sanctions on Afghanistan and return frozen Afghan assets. In contrast, talking about women’s rights in Afghanistan without any Afghan women present or any plans beyond imposing more sanctions. China, Pakistan and Afghanistan talked about the Central Asia-South Asia Power Project, the Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline, the Trans-Afghanistan Railway, the Belt and Road Initiative, and extending the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan. In my opinion, even at its current stage, it is far more productive. These infrastructure projects are concrete ways to realise Afghanistan’s potential as “a hub of regional connectivity,” and to bring sustainable economic development, prosperity and human rights to Afghanistan.

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