CHAPTER FOUR

Figure 26. Development budget expenditures, 2017–19, percentage


One of SIGAR’s quarterly reports published in July 2018 indicated that the Anti-Corruption Justice Center (ACJC), which was established by President Ghani in May 2016 as a new judicial body targeting corruption, has shown little ability to function as intended. More than 100 ACJC warrants are outstanding, while near-

\[76\] National Corruption Survey, 2018, 38.
ly 40 percent of the prosecutors assigned to the ACJC have failed polygraphs, seriously undermining the agency’s legitimacy.\footnote{Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 30, 2018 (Arlington, VA: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2018), 20.} In addition, the 2018 SIGAR report to Congress noted that the ACJC is attempting to placate donors by pursuing several low-level corruption cases rather than the high-level corruption cases that are its mandate.\footnote{Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, July 30, 2018, 125.}

Figure 27. Number of people who paid bribes, 2012–18, millions

While the international community generously opened their wallets at the Brussels conference, the Afghan government failed to deliver on what it had promised to the people of Afghanistan and international aid donors. In addition to the infrastructure projects proposed, the Afghan government came to an agreement with the donors at the conference on a set of deliverables called the *Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework (SMAF)*. Under SMAF, there was a total of 24 indicators for the Afghan government to accomplish by a set timeframe of two or four years. An-

**Figure 28.** Total amount of bribes paid, 2012–18, USD billions

ticorruption strategy, fair and transparent elections, and reduction of poverty were the top three international community requests in addition to a women’s economic empowerment plan and the establishment of a special court division on violence against women. Ultimately, a significant number of the commitments made in the Brussels conference in 2016 have yet to be achieved.\(^7\)\(^9\)

CHAPTER FIVE

The Cost of War

According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United States spent more than $76 billion between 2008 and 2016, most of which occurred during the administration of U.S. president Barack H. Obama.¹ The money was primarily appropriated for development purposes and not for military operations. Afghanistan remained the top recipient of USAID aid throughout this period, receiving on average approximately $9.5 billion per year.² As underscored in figure 29, the amount of aid increased each year and plateaued at $13 billion in 2012–13. That represents a 44-percent increase from the $9 billion in aid delivered in 2009. The Obama administration’s counterinsurgency policy was coupled with humanitarian assistance in the forms of grants and development aid through USAID to win the hearts and minds of the locals. As a result of this massive surge in troops and additional financial support to the government of Afghanistan, U.S. development assistance during Obama’s presidency increased by 250 percent compared to that of his predecessor, George W. Bush.³

In 2012, the Obama administration’s interest in fighting the Taliban and al-Qaeda began to wane. The U.S. presidential election that year was one of the key

² “Foreign Aid Explorer.”
³ “Foreign Aid Explorer.”
reasons for the decline in interest in the Afghanistan conflict. According to a *Washington Post*-ABC News poll conducted in early 2011, nearly three-quarters of Americans believed Obama should withdraw a “substantial number” of combat troops from Afghanistan.4 In May 2012, he flew to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan to sign a strategic partnership agreement with Afghan president Hamid Karzai that established the terms of their relationship following the withdrawal

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of American troops in 2014.\textsuperscript{5} It was an opportunity for President Obama to make an election-year case that he was winding down a costly and increasingly unpopular war at home during a heated political campaign season.

Moreover, the war in Afghanistan was not going as expected. The Obama administration’s relationship with the Karzai government, which had not been good from the start, had been further eroded by mistrust. Karzai’s chief of staff said in an interview that the Obama administration did not want Karzai to win a second term in 2009.\textsuperscript{6} Subsequently, the Karzai team viewed American actions in Afghanistan with suspicion and never really bonded with their U.S. counterparts as they had with the Bush administration. In late 2012, when the author was working at the Afghanistan embassy in Washington, DC, the diplomatic relationship of the embassy with the U.S. Department of State suffered significantly. U.S. officials did not show the willingness to meet with Afghan embassy officials as often as before, which resulted in a lack of interest in the Afghanistan War and development efforts.\textsuperscript{7}

Figure 29 shows an incremental annual decrease in USAID funds to Afghanistan beginning in 2013, cutting back more than 25 percent in one year from $13 billion to $9.7 billion (USD). By the end of Obama’s second term in office in 2016, the total U.S. development aid to Afghanistan decreased to about $5.1 bil-

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{7} Kelemen, “Relationship between Karzai, U.S. Deteriorates.”
\end{flushleft}
lion, a 40-percent drop from when he came into office in 2009.8

U.S. Aid Allocation, 2008–16
According to the USAID database, 85 percent of the total $76 billion given by the United States to Afghanistan between 2008 and 2016 had been allocated to governance-related projects, while only 1.27 percent of the funding was designated for education (figure 30). Further breakdown of governance-related programs in-

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8 “Foreign Aid Explorer.”

Figure 30. U.S. aid funding allocations, 2008–16, by sector

indicates that the security sector reform program, which is designed primarily to support the Afghan National Police (ANP) and Afghan National Army (ANA), absorbed $53 billion, or 69 percent, of the total aid amount (figure 31).⁹

Unfortunately, the sectors for infrastructure, private sector development, education, and health did not receive the kind of funding they needed to flourish. While the majority of the USAID funding was allocated for security sector reform, a lack of oversight and accountability of the program allowed for massive corruption.

⁹ “Foreign Aid Explorer.”
and fraud. As a result, the ANP and ANA were not up to the task to defend and secure Afghanistan when the Taliban retook control of the country in August 2021.

In 2019, Afghan president Ashraf Ghani said at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, that “over 45,000 Afghan security personnel have paid the ultimate sacrifice” since he had become president. This is a staggering casualty figure, equating to nearly 50 deaths a day. The number of ANP and ANA servicemembers killed had continued to increase after the withdrawal of international combat troops in 2014. Rising death tolls could also have been due to increasing insurgent attacks. However, if the troops were well equipped and trained, the number of casualties could have been much lower.

A recent Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report summarizes clearly how little U.S. efforts to develop the Afghan national security forces have achieved in the last two decades:

> the United States failed to implement—
> in coordination with Afghan leadership and NATO partners—a stable and comprehensive ANDSF [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces] force design that would guide the long-term structure of the U.S. advisory effort. Without a long-term plan that detailed desired operational capabilities, equipping decisions were often ad hoc and inconsistent from year to year. Commanders serving one-year rotations prioritized the tactical fight

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and equipped the ANDSF with little regard for past equipping decisions or future expenses.\textsuperscript{11}

In addition to a lack of sustainable development in the security sector, the report also highlights the fact that, while the U.S. government provided close to $5 billion a year in security sector assistance to Afghanistan, without a reduction in violence through a political settlement or expansion of the Afghan government’s ability to increase revenue through taxes, Afghan security forces’ sustainability would be fully reliant on donors.\textsuperscript{12} In a CBS \textit{60 Minutes} interview, Ghani said, “We will not be able to support our army for six months without the U.S. support, and U.S. capabilities.”\textsuperscript{13} Hence, after 20 years and more than $200 billion spent on building Afghan security forces capacities and capabilities, the situation was as dire when the Taliban fighters encroached on Kabul in August 2021 as it was in 2001, if not more so.

Had the United States invested more in the economic growth and education sectors, the situation might have been dramatically different. A proverb says that if you give a poor man a fish, you feed him for a day, but if you teach him to fish, you find him an occupation

\textsuperscript{12} Divided Responsibility, 145.
that will feed him for a lifetime.\textsuperscript{14} This concept runs parallel to the issues of development aid to Afghanistan. Unofficial unemployment numbers in Afghanistan was roughly about 35–40 percent prior to the U.S.-backed government collapse. Young students graduate with advanced degrees from public and private universities in hopes of obtaining a job and making a decent living.\textsuperscript{15} However, most went from one government ministry building to another in search of a higher-level official who would hire them. When the author was in Kabul, he would receive calls from relatives who wanted him to find them a job at the Ministry of Finance. It was not until sometime later that the author realized this is the only way for many people to find employment—one had to know someone in the government to get a job. Occupations in the private sector were very limited or nonexistent, so people primarily relied on scarce government work. Afghanistan has never been known for production. It has always been heavily reliant on goods imported from neighboring countries. While new jobs are being created in Iran and Pakistan as a

\textsuperscript{14} There is some debate about the origin of this saying. Though many have long believed that it is a Chinese proverb, there is no evidence tying it to China. It likely originated in England in the 1880s by Anne Isabella Ritchie, the daughter of William Makepeace Thackeray, who wrote in her novel \textit{Mrs. Dymond}, “He certainly doesn’t practise \textsuperscript{[sic]} his precepts, but I suppose the patron meant that if you give a man a fish he is hungry again in an hour; if you teach him to catch a fish you do him a good turn.” Miss Thackery, \textit{Mrs. Dymond}, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1886).

\textsuperscript{15} “Unemployment Rate Spikes in Afghanistan,” TOLO News, 2 October 2015.
result of increased exports to Afghanistan, the Afghan economy remains stagnant, and young people in the country are unemployed.\textsuperscript{16}

Afghanistan has developed an economic relationship that is reliant on Pakistan and Iran as a result of its underdeveloped private sector. Since 2001, Pakistan has become the largest exporter to Afghanistan, with annual exports of approximately $1.7 billion (USD).\textsuperscript{17} Conversely, Pakistan is a major export market for Afghanistan’s raw materials, with approximately $71 million exported to Pakistan each year, accounting for 21.8 percent of all Afghan exports.\textsuperscript{18} With more than $1 billion in exports to Afghanistan in 2018, Iran has surpassed the United States as the second-largest exporter. However, the vast bulk of Afghanistan’s exports to Pakistan and Iran are raw materials that are processed and used in consumer goods before being resold to Afghans at a higher price.\textsuperscript{19}

The Afghan economy has remained underdeveloped partially as a result of this disproportionate transaction with its neighbors. Due to high import prices and high unemployment, young Afghan men have been forced to migrate to Iran and Pakistan in search of work. Usually, they are exploited, abused, tortured, and humiliated. They typically enter these countries illegally and without a work visa. The United Nations

\textsuperscript{17} “Pakistan and Afghanistan,” Institute for the Study of War, accessed 20 July 2021.
\textsuperscript{18} “Pakistan and Afghanistan.”
\textsuperscript{19} “Pakistan and Afghanistan.”
High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) interviewed 784 Afghans deported from Iran and Pakistan, the vast majority of whom were single men. According to one of the survey’s main findings, “the high rate of unemployment, low wages, and widespread poverty in Afghanistan are the major push factors for single men to migrate to Iran and Pakistan.” The current migration flow between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran is primarily a labor migration issue rather than a refugee issue.

The number of undocumented Afghans in Iran and Pakistan is unknown. However, during the last two years, Iranian authorities have deported more than 700,000 Afghans who they claim violated immigration laws and were working there illegally. An estimated $500 million (USD) in remittances is sent back to Afghanistan each year from Iran alone, accounting for roughly 6 percent of Afghanistan’s national GDP.

Those young men who cannot afford to leave Afghanistan to avoid the unemployment problem remain in the country. This segment of the population is extremely vulnerable and easily exploited by insurgents. According to a recent report by the European Asylum Support Office, “joblessness, poverty and the government’s inattention has left youth with few other op-

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21 Farhad, “Manage Afghan Labour Migration to Curb Irregular Flow to Iran, Study Urges.”
tions but enlisting in the insurgent’s ranks.”24 The news media has reported several cases of young unemployed Afghan men joining the Taliban. When young people are uprooted, jobless, intolerant, alienated, and have few opportunities for positive engagement, they represent a ready pool of recruits for groups seeking to mobilize violence, such as the Taliban and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).25

The Total Cost of War in Afghanistan, 2001–20

THE HUMAN COST

According to the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, the total human fatality of the war in Afghanistan has accounted for more than 157,000 deaths since the war began in October 2001.26 The total number of U.S. servicemembers killed in Afghanistan amounts to 2,314 as of August 2020.27 The following graph shows the number of U.S. troops killed in action during the execution of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS) from

26 Neta C. Crawford and Catherine Lutz, Human Cost of Post 9/11 Wars: Direct War Deaths in Major War Zones, Afghanistan and Pakistan (October 2001–October 2019); Iraq (March 2003–October 2019); Syria (September 2014–October 2019); Yemen (October 2002–October 2019); and Other (Providence, RI: Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, 2019).
2001 to 2020 (figure 32). As illustrated, the number of casualties steadily increased from 2004 and peaked with the largest number of casualties in a year at 710 in 2010.\textsuperscript{28} One of the main reasons for this increase in fatalities was the escalation of the war. The Taliban, once considered defeated in 2001, reemerged as a greater force than anticipated.

In addition to U.S. servicemembers, troops from

\textsuperscript{28}“Number of Fatalities among Western Coalition Soldiers Involved in the Execution of Operation Enduring Freedom from 2001 to 2020,” Statista, 2021.
51 other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and partner nations in Afghanistan created a Western Coalition during the Global War on Terrorism. They also endured casualties, as described in the chart above (figure 33). Troops from the United Kingdom, Canada, France, and Germany sustained the highest level of casualties after the United States, with 455, 158, 86, and 54 troops killed, respectively.²⁹

²⁹ “Number of Fatalities among Western Coalition Soldiers Involved in the Execution of Operation Enduring Freedom from 2001 to 2020.”
U.S. and Western Coalition casualties started to decline in 2010 as the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) took the lead in the battle with the Taliban. Afghans were now at the forefront of the fight, with the support from the Western Coalition militaries, including the United States. As they took the lead, however, their casualties increased. Since the ANSF had limited training and equipment, their casualties skyrocketed as more action took place. The total number of ANP and ANA deaths is not clear. However, in September 2013, the commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, U.S. Marine Corps general Joseph F. Dunford Jr., said that more than 100 ANSF personnel were being killed each week. In 2014, SIGAR reported 6,785 ANSF killed from January to November 2016, a rate of about 147 per week. In 2016, the Taliban insurgents killed so many Afghan security forces, an average of 22 per day, that the Afghan and U.S. governments agreed to keep battlefield death statistics classified the following year.

Afghan civilians have not been insulated from the dangers of the war; indeed, they have borne the brunt of it. “Almost no civilian in Afghanistan has escaped being personally affected in some way by the ongoing violence,” said Tadamichi Yamamoto, the UN Secretary-

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General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). According to UNAMA, the number of civilian casualties in 2019 had surpassed a grim milestone of 100,000 people killed during the war.

The war also claimed the lives of more than 65 journalists and 400 humanitarian workers. Reporters Without Borders (Reporters sans Frontières, RSF) considers Afghanistan one of the deadliest places for journalists to work, with increased fatalities due to bombings and targeted shootings.

THE DOLLAR COST

According to the latest SIGAR report, as of December 2020, the United States appropriated approximately $143.27 billion for Afghanistan reconstruction and $815.7 billion for OEF and OFS in Afghanistan since 2002. In simpler terms, this $143.27 billion spent is considered humanitarian assistance (military and non-military spending) and primarily consisted of obligations of USAID and the U.S. Departments of State and Defense. The $815.7 billion was mainly U.S. military spending, including the cost of maintaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan, conducting counterinsurgency opera-

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34 “Afghanistan: Civilian Casualties Exceed 10,000 for Sixth Straight Year.”
35 Crawford and Lutz, Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars.
tions, and supplying American troops with food, clothing, medical care, special pay, and benefits.

More than $16.90 billion of the $143.27 billion for Afghanistan reconstruction was provided directly in budget assistance to the government of Afghanistan. More than $10.94 billion given to Afghan government ministries and institutions and more than $5.96 billion given to the following multinational trust funds, which supported various projects in coordination with the government of Afghanistan:

- World Bank-managed Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF)
- United Nations-managed Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA)
- Asian Development Bank-managed Afghanistan Infrastructure Trust Fund (AITF)

These multilateral institutions played a significant role in supporting Afghanistan relief and reconstruction efforts. In addition to the United States, various other major donors including Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, the European Union, Canada, Australia, Norway, the Netherlands, and Italy had provided more than $22.7 billion since 2002 for Afghanistan reconstruction efforts (figure 34).

Table 1 puts the overall cost of the international community’s nation-building efforts in Afghanistan.

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**Figure 34.** Contributions to ARTF, UNOCHA, LOTFA, and NATO Afghan National Army programs, 2002–20, USD billions


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<th>Source: Quarterl...</th>
<th><strong>Table 1.</strong> International spending to rebuild Afghanistan, USD billions</th>
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<td>U.S. military spending</td>
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into perspective. The total price tag comes to just $18 billion short of $1 trillion during the course of the conflict in Afghanistan.

To further scrutinize the overall price tag of $982 billion, the following graph highlights the percentage of U.S. military and nonmilitary spending in Afghanistan (figure 35).41 These data points represent a staggering divergence in priorities, unlike what happened in Europe after World War II with the Marshall Plan fund. The U.S. humanitarian aid component of this spending package accounts for approximately $143.27 billion, which is divided into four major categories of reconstruction and related funding: security, governance and development, humanitarian, and oversight and operations. The following chart indicates that of the total $143.27 billion, 64 percent has been spent on security, 26 percent on governance and development, and only 3 percent for humanitarian needs (figure 36).42

Under the governance and development category, five distinct programs are important to highlight, primarily because of the disproportionate allocation of money for them. The amount of money assigned to each program is not aligned with the true needs of the Afghan people on the ground. This impracticable approach emphasizes the fact that policymakers in Washington,

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41 As shown in figure 35, 83 percent of the overall U.S. expenditures in Afghanistan has had some sort of a military element to it. For example, 9 percent of the total aid has been allocated to Afghan security forces, which also has a large military portion to it. Only 5.4 percent of the nearly $1 trillion spent in Afghanistan so far has been appropriated for humanitarian assistance. Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, Jan 30, 2021, 26–45.

DC, international development experts in Kabul, and Afghan politicians have failed to understand the basic needs of the population and the disconnect between those managing the funds and those who need the aid.

According to the SIGAR report, the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), which runs the Voice of America Dari and Pashto language programs and Radio Freedom in Afghanistan, was funded by more than $281 million (USD) in the last 10 years.\(^\text{43}\) In compari-
son, the U.S. Department of State-sponsored exchange programs, such as the Fulbright Foreign Student Program and Youth Exchange and Study (YES) Program, which supported the author’s education in the United States, only received $96.5 million in the last 20 year (figure 37).\footnote{Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, Jan 30, 2021, 172.} The funding for these exchange programs has continued to decrease in recent years mainly due to the cancellation of the YES Program in 2012, which had been bringing in more than 40 high school ex-

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure36.png}
\caption{Total aid allocations to Afghanistan, by program, 2001–20, percentage}
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change students from across Afghanistan to the United States for one school year. It could be argued that public awareness through USAGM is more critical than the educational exchange programs, given that educational programs such as YES and Fulbright have already done a lot more for cultural awareness and cross-culture pollination than any media awareness campaign could. However, the importance of these exchange programs in building the capacity of Afghan youth who are currently playing a vital role in the Afghan government.

Figure 37. Education compared with USAGM funding allocations, 2009–20, USD millions

and may become future leaders in the country cannot be measured. Having a cadre of people who can fill future leadership roles in the government would not only help with effective governance but also extend the benefit of peace and prosperity across the region and throughout the world. Hence, these funds have not been focused on the most efficient use.

When comparing funding for youth survival and health with the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) program, data shows that for every $100 spent on the INCLE program, child health programs received only $9 in the last two decades (figure 38). At the same time, according to a recent UN report, “there are two million children in [Afghanistan] which suffer from acute malnutrition, among them 600,000 children that suffer from severe acute malnutrition.”45 Also, according to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the United States has spent on average $1.5 million a day since 2002, or nearly $9 billion, on antinarcotics efforts.46 Yet, UN figures show that the total estimated area devoted to opium poppy cultivation reached a record high in 2017.47 The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy report issued in February 2020 indicated that the highest level of opi-

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47 “Record-high Opium Production in Afghanistan Creates Multiple Challenges for Region and Beyond, UN Warns,” UN News, 21 May 2018.
um was produced in 2017 with 9,140 metric tons, and 2019 was the second-highest year for poppy cultivation in that count.\textsuperscript{48}

Moreover, Afghanistan’s infrastructure was severely crippled due to the decades of war and has only received a small fraction of the total aid directed to the United States’ reconstruction efforts in that country. Accord-


\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure38.png}
\caption{Child health program compared with narcotics control program fund allocations, 2009–20, USD millions}
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ing to the SIGAR report, the Afghanistan Infrastructure Trust Fund, which provides significant funding to support Afghanistan relief and reconstruction efforts through multilateral institutions like the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank, has only received 2.82 percent of the total aid money given to Afghanistan, and that funding ceased in the last five years (figure 39). The United States’ major contribution to the fund came during 2011–14. Nonetheless, Kabul, Afghani-

Figure 39. Afghanistan Infrastructure Trust Fund allocations, 2009–20, USD millions

Stan’s capital city, remains without regular electricity due to a lack of funding and infrastructure insecurity. Despite the fact that billions of dollars have been poured into reconstruction efforts, Afghans continue to suffer from a lack of basic infrastructure needs, such as roads, bridges, and tunnels, which are required to help the nascent market economy flourish.\footnote{Dante Schultz, “The Urgent Need to Expand Afghanistan’s Electricity Supplies,” Caspian Policy Center, 29 January 2021.}
Prior to becoming president, Donald J. Trump had extensively criticized the United States’ involvement in Afghanistan. He stated that invading Afghanistan in 2001 was a “bad mistake.” He began pushing for an end to the conflict in Afghanistan as early as 2011. In one of his tweets, Trump called Afghanistan “a complete waste.” Furthermore, he added that it was “time to come home!” In yet another tweet, he claimed that the United States had “wasted an enormous amount of blood and treasure . . . wasted lives” in Afghanistan. He called the war “nonsense” and called for the rebuilding of America instead.¹

Despite this early rhetoric, Afghanistan was barely mentioned by the candidates during the 2016 presidential campaign. The GOP platform was noticeably quiet on the topic. Trump was asked whether he thought “American boots should continue on the ground in Afghanistan” during an interview with CNN in October 2015. “We made a terrible mistake getting involved there in the first place,” Trump said. “It’s a mess, it’s a mess and at this point we probably have to (leave U.S. troops in Afghanistan) because that thing will collapse in about two seconds after they leave.” He did, however,

later qualify his comments: “I would leave the troops there, begrudgingly.”

Following his election, and after months of deliberation and discussions with various stakeholders, including the government of Afghanistan, President Trump delivered his “strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia” in August 2017. He started by acknowledging that the U.S. war in Afghanistan was the longest war in American history. “I share the American people’s frustration,” he added. “I also share their frustration over a foreign policy that has spent too much time, energy, money and most importantly lives, trying to rebuild countries in our own image, instead of pursuing our security interests above all other considerations.”

Trump’s strategy for Afghanistan was based on the following three pillars:

1. A plan of victory for those in combat. “They deserve the tools they need, and the trust they have earned, to fight and to win,” Trump said in his speech. Despite his original instinct, which was to pull out of Afghanistan completely, he thought the consequences of a rapid exit would be both predictable and unacceptable. A hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum that terrorists, includ-

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4 Trump remarks.
ing the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda, would fill, as witnessed in Iraq in 2011.\(^5\)

2. A plan that would not repeat the same mistakes made in Iraq. A core pillar of the new U.S. strategy was to shift from a time-based approach to one based on conditions. “Conditions on the ground—not arbitrary timetables—will guide our strategy from now on,” the president said.\(^6\)

3. A plan that would use all the United States’ diplomatic, economic, and military might to achieve a successful outcome in Afghanistan. This included negotiating a political settlement with the Taliban.

Trump vowed that the United States is not “nation-building again” but “killing terrorists” in Afghanistan. “However,” the president’s strategy concluded, “our commitment [to Afghanistan] is not unlimited, and our support is not a blank check. The government of Afghanistan must carry their share of the military, political, and economic burden.”\(^7\)

The term *blank check* was used by U.S. president Barack H. Obama in his strategy for Afghanistan as

\(^5\) Trump remarks.  
\(^6\) Trump remarks.  
\(^7\) Trump remarks.
The pattern here is quite interesting, in which both a Democratic and Republican president did not trust the government of Afghanistan. Both believed that American taxpayer dollars were being squandered in that country.

Trump’s decision for the United States to keep boots on the ground with a somewhat enlarged military presence is what the Afghan people wanted. However, the president’s approach contained two critical and fundamental flaws. First, the Trump administration sidelined the Afghan government in most, if not all, of its decisions regarding Afghanistan. Second, it reduced development aid to historical lows.

The government of Afghanistan was shut out of U.S.–Taliban peace talks in Qatar. They were not privy to the closed-door negotiations taking place between U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay M. Khalilzad and the Taliban on a peace deal. President of Afghanistan Ashraf Ghani was so frustrated that he lashed out at U.S. officials through his national security advisor, Hamdullah Mohib, who said a U.S.–Taliban deal would dishonor fallen U.S. troops and called Khalilzad an American “vicerey” with ambitions to head an interim Afghan government. The comments became so heated that the U.S. Depart-

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ment of State summoned Mohib and warned him that his comments could hurt bilateral relations in the peace process.\textsuperscript{11}

In 2020, the Afghan government was caught by surprise when Trump announced on Twitter that the last of the U.S. troops in Afghanistan would return home before the end of December. The tweet contradicted remarks by his national security advisor, Robert C. O’Brien Jr., who said that “as of today, there are under 5,000 [U.S. troops in Afghanistan] and that will go down to 2,500 by early next year.”\textsuperscript{12} Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed welcomed Trump’s statement and called it a positive step for the peace agreement.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Economic Development Assistance during the Trump Era}

President Donald Trump’s “America first” policy was based on the concept of retreating from America’s intervention abroad, including drastically cutting foreign aid. In his 2017 budget proposal, one thing was evident when Trump announced in May: “America First” meant less money for foreign aid. The president wanted to cut foreign aid by up to 37 percent, and there were rumors that some administration officials were considering merging USAID and the Department of State.\textsuperscript{14}

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For the general public, there are misconceptions about U.S. spending on foreign assistance. While public opinion polls show that Americans believe that foreign aid accounts for around 25 percent of federal spending, it actually accounts for less than 1 percent of the federal budget. Another fallacy is that foreign aid is unpopular in the United States. According to polling conducted during the last 25 years, up to 75 percent of Americans support international aid initiatives. In this process, development aid to Afghanistan also came under the chopping block of the Trump administration. On the economic development front, President Trump’s administration cut back on aid to Afghanistan significantly from 2017 through 2019. According to USAID, on average about $2.4 billion in assistance was appropriated for Afghanistan development during this period (figure 40).

This massive reduction in American aid to the war-ravaged and poverty-ridden country could not have come at a more difficult time as COVID-19 battered the local Afghan economy. When COVID struck in early spring 2020, Afghanistan was already in the midst of a prolonged conflict, an uncertain political climate, and a tenuous peace process. In March, the

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16 In comparison, the Obama administration sent more than $9.5 billion on average per year during its tenure. Figure 40 highlights 2019 as the year with the lowest amount of U.S. assistance to Afghanistan since the war began in 2001, with only $345 million. “Foreign Aid Explorer,” USAID, 2021.
government-imposed restrictions forced many day-laborers further into poverty and hunger. According to the most recent household survey, nearly 15 million Afghans in 2 million households are vulnerable to economic lockdown. Most of these people earn their living from activities such as shop keeping, selling groceries, selling fruit on a pushcart, or physical day labor.

Without a reliable stream of income, some of these people had to sell their belongings to feed their families. According to a recent World Bank publication, COVID lockdowns and restrictions will result in heightened poverty across Afghanistan. By some estimates, one in every five households will see their income decline by 75 percent or more due to COVID shock. Overall, Afghanistan’s economy is set to contract by 7.4 percent in 2020 because of COVID, exacerbating poverty and leading to a sharp decline in government revenues. World Bank estimates show the poverty rate increasing from a baseline of 54.5 percent in 2017 to up to 72 percent in 2020. According to a recent Asian Development Bank report, the fiscal revenue of Afghanistan fell in 2020 due to the pandemic from approximately 13.6 percent of GDP in 2019 to about 15 percent in 2020. Exports declined by more than 28 percent in the second half of 2020.

Amid the pandemic and rising food insecurity, inflation is yet another major concern. Afghanistan is an import-driven economy, with more than 80 percent of its food imported from neighboring countries. COVID lockdowns have resulted in global food price increases, including in Afghanistan. Before the pandemic, the price of a bag of flour was about $19 (USD). Within a week, the price of the same bag increased by 31 percent.

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20 Cancho and Pradhan, “Mitigating the Poverty Implications of COVID-19 in Afghanistan.”
21 Cancho and Pradhan, “Mitigating the Poverty Implications of COVID-19 in Afghanistan.”
to about $25, leaving some people without bread—a vital nutritional supplement on every Afghan dining table.\textsuperscript{23} However, inflation is projected to moderate to 5 percent in 2021 and 4 percent in 2022 as food supplies improve.\textsuperscript{24}

The Peace Deal with the Taliban

Despite other challenges, the Afghan government and the Trump administration had been mostly focused on striking a peace deal with the Taliban. While people were suffering from hunger and economic devastation, the highest priority for the two governments continued to be peace talks with the group that has killed hundreds of thousands of Afghans and Americans. At one point, Trump considered inviting the Taliban leaders to Camp David, Maryland, in September 2019. Talks broke down and the invitation was withdrawn after the Taliban killed an American soldier and 12 other people in Kabul.\textsuperscript{25} Peace negotiations were called off for some period thereafter. However, after an 18-month negotiation process, the United States ultimately signed a peace deal with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar, in February 2020.\textsuperscript{26} The peace deal reached to end the 19-year-long Afghan conflict marked the beginning of a phased


\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Afghanistan’s Economy to Rebound in 2021 Despite Challenges} (Manila, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2021).


withdrawal of American soldiers from the South Asian country. At the start of 2020, the United States had fewer than 13,000 troops in Afghanistan. However, after signing the deal with the Taliban, that number dropped substantially, and by January 2021, only about 2,500 U.S. troops were left in Afghanistan.²⁷

The agreement had the following four points:

1. The United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) must withdraw all their troops from Afghanistan within 14 months. While the majority of Afghans support the U.S. presence in their country, a small infringed minority—the Taliban—were now calling the shots in Afghanistan and its future.

2. The Taliban must guarantee that Afghan soil will not be used as a launchpad that would threaten the security of the United States. Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant–Khorasan Province (ISIS–K) and various other local militia groups are active in Afghanistan using the platform provided by the Taliban.²⁸ It is extremely difficult for the Taliban to ensure that these groups re-

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main committed to the deal they made with the United States. While ISIS–K and other groups are poised and unified around the cause to fight the U.S. and Afghan governments, the Taliban leadership is fragmented at best and adversarial at worst.

3. The Taliban must negotiate with the government of Afghanistan on a power-sharing deal. H. R. McMaster, President Trump’s former national security advisor, recently said in an interview: “What (does) power-sharing with the Taliban look like? Does that look like . . . every other girls’ school bulldozed? Or does it look like mass executions in the soccer stadium every other Saturday?”\(^\text{29}\) The question remains: What would this power-sharing deal with the Taliban look like? How much of the recent gains in terms of women’s empowerment, economic development, and social liberties would Afghans have to sacrifice?

4. A permanent and comprehensive ceasefire must be achieved. Since the United States signed the so-called peace deal with the Taliban, the war against Afghan soldiers and its po-

lice force significantly intensified. The United States and Taliban struck a truce, but there was no ceasefire in sight for Afghans.

As a direct result of the deal with the United States, the Taliban ceased their attacks on foreign troops. No U.S. servicemembers were killed in Afghanistan for more than a year since the Trump 2020 deal was struck.\(^30\) However, the Taliban increased their offensive against the Afghan National Army (ANA), the Afghan National Police (ANP), and ordinary Afghans. According to the *New York Times*, “at least 703 Afghan security forces and 208 civilians were killed . . . in June [alone], the highest count among security forces since . . . September 2018.”\(^31\) Afghan civilian casualties increased 29 percent during the first three months of 2021, according to a UN report.\(^32\)

In January 2021, when President Joseph R. Biden Jr. came into office, he was now the fourth U.S. president—two Republicans and two Democrats—to preside over this prolonged war. As with his predecessors, the Afghan war was one of the foreign policy challenges handed to him, and he had to decide how to deal with it. Biden’s options were to either support the so-called “Trump-deal” with the Taliban or change course. Biden took his time to review the Afghanistan policy for the

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\(^{30}\) Gul, “Pompeo Defends Trump’s Afghan Peace Plan, Ensuing ‘Incredible Progress’.”


first several months in office. On 14 April, he announced his administration’s approach to the war. He delivered his strategy from the Treaty Room at the White House, the same location where President George W. Bush announced the start of the war on 7 October 2001, and called for an end to America’s longest war.\textsuperscript{33} While he offered few specifics about his approach to the war during the 2020 presidential campaign, Afghans and those involved in Afghanistan affairs had a good sense as to where candidate Biden stood on this issue. As President Barack H. Obama’s vice president in 2009, Biden was one of the few voices in the administration who advised the president to lean toward a smaller counterterrorism role in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{34} He argued for a residual force of about 2,500 troops that would only conduct surveillance and over-the-horizon operations to go after high-risk Taliban and al-Qaeda figures.\textsuperscript{35}

Now as president, Biden wanted to deliver on what he had previously argued was the right approach for the war in Afghanistan. First, he outlined the reason for America’s continued involvement in the war, which he believed was “to ensure that Afghanistan would not be used as a base from which to attack our homeland again.” He argued that the United States had accomplished that goal. Second, Osama bin Laden, master-

\textsuperscript{34} Max Fisher, “In White House, Biden Pushes Back on Afghanistan,” \textit{Atlantic}, 14 October 2009.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Over-the-horizon} refers to an operation launched from beyond the visual and radar range of the area. Carol E. Lee, “Frustrated Military Officials Want Biden to Make a Decision on Afghanistan,” NBC News, 8 April 2021.
mind of the 9/11 attacks, had been killed, so the reasons for remaining in Afghanistan were becoming increasingly unclear. Therefore, Biden decided to end America’s longest war by bringing all American troops out of Afghanistan by 31 August 2021 with no conditions attached, four months later than the 1 May deadline originally set by the Trump administration.36

In his approach, President Biden had significantly overestimated the Afghan government’s capacity. Presumably, he was confident that a government backed by the United States for more than two decades could now stand on its feet as the American presence diminished. In July 2021, when asked by a reporter whether he had confidence that the Afghan government would not collapse after full U.S. withdrawal, Biden said, “[The Afghan government] clearly [has] the capacity to sustain the government in place. They have the forces. They have the equipment. . . . The likelihood there’s going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely.”37

He could not have been more wrong. As Biden announced the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan without any preconditions, the Taliban gained momentum and began their massive offensive against the Afghan government. The United States lost any considerable leverage over the Taliban by announcing that we would withdraw regardless and with no conditions attached.

The Taliban now had no one to fear or hide from, but could now fight the nascent ANA and ANP that were grappling with the new reality of no foreign troop support. The Taliban considered themselves victorious—a small group that defeated a superpower. Their foot soldiers gained confidence as their leadership gained an upper hand in the talks with the Afghan government in Doha, Qatar. Their negotiating team no longer seemed interested in discussing the establishment of an inclusive government with the Ashraf Ghani administration. They had their eye on the prize, which was closer than they had previously expected.38

Until 5 August 2021, the central government of Afghanistan had control over all the provincial capitals of 34 provinces, according to the *Long War Journal*. A day later, the Taliban captured two provincial capitals: Zaranj, the capital of Nimroz Province; and Sar-e Pol the capital of Sar-e Pol Province. Five days later, on 12 August, one of the largest provinces, Herat, fell to the Taliban, and Kandahar then fell the following day.39 On 15 August, people in Kabul woke up to an ordinary day and went about their daily activities, until it was announced later that afternoon that President Ghani had fled the country.40 Reports indicated that everyone in the government, including the security forces, aban-

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40 “Afghan President Says He Left Country to Avoid Bloodshed,” Reuters, 15 August 2021.
doned their posts as the news spread.\textsuperscript{41} Afghans were now left to the mercy of a brutal force, the Taliban. Utter chaos and panic erupted on the streets of Kabul as the day wore on. At the airport, a desperate exodus was taking place, with thousands of people clamoring to board flights. By the evening, scenes of the Taliban entering the presidential palace and posing with guns and rifles in Ashraf Ghani’s lavish presidential office emerged. Utter shock and mayhem consumed the capital city, which was now in full control of the Taliban. The government that the United States had propped up for two decades with massive amounts of blood and money collapsed within 11 days.\textsuperscript{42}

The rapidly evolving situation caught many by surprise, including the U.S. government and the Taliban.\textsuperscript{43} “We’ve seen that that [Afghan] force has been unable to defend the country, and that [the collapse of the Afghan government] has happened more quickly than we anticipated,” Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken told CNN.\textsuperscript{44} The Biden administration quickly announced a massive evacuation operation by sending 6,000 troops back to Kabul to facilitate the process. The 31 August deadline for a full withdrawal of servicemembers was

\textsuperscript{41} Clarissa Ward et al., “Afghan President Ashraf Ghani Flees the Country as Taliban Forces Enter the Capital,” CNN, 16 August 2021.
\textsuperscript{44} “Secretary Antony J. Blinken with Jake Tapper of State of the Union on CNN,” press release, U.S. Department of State, 15 August 2021.
looming large as the Pentagon initiated the evacuation of Americans and their Afghan staffers who had helped with the 20-year-long war. As the Americans scrambled to depart, the Afghans were left in shock. The Taliban leadership began their victorious chants by releasing a video congratulating everyone for their success. Abdul Ghani Baradar said in a recorded video from Doha: “We have reached a victory that wasn’t expected.”

They began taking charge of the city by sending group chat messages via WhatsApp and Facebook, proclaiming that the Islamic Emirate was now in charge of security in Kabul. The messages listed phone numbers for citizens to call if they saw problems such as looting or armed robbery.

The Pentagon and the Department of State completed a chaotic evacuation and a total troop pullout by 31 August. Once the operation began on 14 August, the United States was able to evacuate more than 116,700 people from Afghanistan, including 5,500 U.S. citizens and their families. During the process, 13 U.S. military personnel and more than 175 Afghans were killed by a suicide attack at the crowded entrance of the Kabul International Airport. U.S. Army major general Christopher T. Donahue was the last Amer-

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46 George et al., “Afghan Government Collapses as Taliban Sweeps in, U.S. Sends More Troops to Aid Chaotic Withdrawal.”
The Trump-Biden strategy for Afghanistan was disastrous on multiple fronts for both the United States and Afghanistan. According to John Bolton, former Trump national security advisor, one of the major blunders the Trump negotiators made initially was to sideline the duly elected government of Afghanistan—the Ashraf Ghani administration—when negotiating with the Taliban. Bolton added that “there are a lot of mistakes in the deal [with the Taliban] itself. But the fundamental problem of dealing with this terrorist organization is that the Trump negotiators delegitimized the Afghan government. The government we set up. The government with which all the many flaws had at least some democratic legitimacy, of which Taliban had none.”

Many wonder how and why the Afghan National Army collapsed so quickly in those 11 days. Some argue, including President Biden, that they did not have the will to fight. Biden said in a mid-August speech that “American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves. The Afghan military collapsed, sometimes without trying to fight.” In point of fact, the Afghan Army did put up a fight against the

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Taliban and endured significant losses in recent months and years since the U.S. retreated from their combat role in 2014. More than 66,000 members of the Afghan National Army and Police lost their lives in the last 20 years, while only 2,448 American servicemembers were killed during this same period.\textsuperscript{52} The Trump-Biden policy, along with the incompetent political leadership in Kabul, failed to support those who were fighting in the battle. Bolton argued that

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by de-recognizing the government [of Afghanistan during the negotiations with the Taliban] in effect, we [the United States] shattered the morale of the Afghan army. The army is saying well, if the Americans won’t even protect that government, why are we going to end up protecting it? That’s why honestly, nobody should have been surprised that the army collapsed so quickly when Biden announced the final withdrawal.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quotation}

In addition, the Trump agreement with the Taliban required the Ashraf Ghani government to release 5,000 Taliban who were imprisoned by the government. Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan reconciliation, pressured the Afghan government last year to release the prisoners as an incentive for the Taliban to make peace. According to H. R. McMaster, “the Taliban viewed the release as a sign of

\textsuperscript{53} Takala, “John Bolton Blames Trump for Afghanistan.”
weakness and an opportunity to replenish its forces in anticipation of its offensive.”54 Ashraf Ghani half-heartedly agreed to the prisoner release as the pressure from the Trump administration mounted, hoping that it would pave the way for a peaceful settlement with the Taliban.55 Five months after their release, more than 600 of the released Taliban prisoners were arrested on the battlefield for plotting deadly attacks against government forces and civilians.56

However, the Trump agreement with the Taliban did require all U.S. and NATO troops to stage a “conditions-based” complete withdrawal from Afghanistan by May 2021.57 The conditions-based provision is significant in this case, given that the Biden administration did not abide by the terms:

1. A negotiated political power-sharing deal with the Afghan government
2. A permanent and comprehensive ceasefire must be achieved58

The Biden administration called for a full U.S. and NATO troops pullout without achieving either of the aforementioned conditions set in the Trump deal. That alone caused the confidence of the Afghan govern-

57 Gul, “Afghan Official.”
ment and security forces to erode as the Taliban pushed through their massive spring offensive against Afghan forces. H. R. McMaster said recently that “we delivered really tremendous psychological blows to the Afghan people, Afghan leaders and Afghan security forces on our way out.” The final result was the unexpected collapse of a government in which the United States, along with its NATO allies, heavily invested their lives and money for the last 20 years.

Initially, the Trump administration made the mistake of recognizing the Taliban and giving them legitimacy by engaging with them directly. This action gave the Taliban a platform where their officials could easily operate internationally, traveling on formal visits to various countries including Russia, China, and Iran to seek their support. This legitimacy and freedom of movement created an image of the Taliban around the world in which they propagated this falsehood and claimed that they were no longer the Taliban of the 1990s. It put the Ghani administration in an odd situation and a weakened position.

On the domestic front, Ashraf Ghani failed to build consensus among the political leaders in the country. Electoral tensions during the 2019 presidential campaign grew so heated that the disputed election results caused both Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, the two top contenders, to hold separate inaugurations on the same

At the same time, intra-Afghan negotiations with the Taliban were shaping up, and the Afghan government needed to project a strong united front to the Taliban. However, talks were stalled by both sides for months, and negotiation teams made little progress in Doha. The Taliban took advantage of the opportunity and went on a diplomatic blitz in the last year. Their negotiating team traveled to Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Russia, and later to China on an offensive to seek their support. These visits further legitimized their existence on the Afghan political landscape.

The United States is now seen to have failed miserably in Afghanistan by Afghans and others in the region. NATO allies are rethinking their future defense without the United States. The high representative of the European Union for foreign affairs and security policy, Josep Borrell, said “This [the U.S. withdrawal] has been above all a catastrophe for the Afghan people. It’s a failure of the Western world and it’s a game changer for international relations.” Afghanistan has proven just how many allies rely on the United States. As a result, the question of whether Europeans should now wean themselves of that reliance and invest in and build their own security has emerged. During Donald Trump’s presidency, French president Emmanuel Macron advocated for a “European army,” and events in Afghanistan are reviving a similar debate. Borrell also suggested that

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62 “High-stakes Talks between Afghan Gov’t, Taliban as Fighting Rages,” *Al Jazeera*, 17 July 2021.
“the EU must be able to intervene to protect our interests when the Americans don’t want to be involved.”

Conversely, while the Taliban consider themselves victorious and a force to be reckoned with, Afghans have lost everything. They lost the gains made in the past 20 years in a matter of days. Young girls who had never lived under the former Taliban regime are now young adults who aspired to become doctors or teachers. Afghan women who had worked tirelessly and studied hard in hopes of achieving higher goals in life now have no hope to see them to fruition. An Afghan girls’ robotics team had the prospect of competing in major international competitions, inventing new tools; however, they were evacuated from Kabul a day after the Taliban took over and now live as refugees in Mexico. In addition, during the last 20 years, hundreds of thousands of Afghan students studied abroad, gained tangible experiences, and returned with the energy and confidence to help develop their country. The human capital deficit that the country had experienced was slowly dissipating. Now, all those young professionals marched en masse with their young children to the Kabul International Airport following the Taliban takeover. Most of the young and educated have either fled the country or intend to leave at the first opportunity. As a result of the loss of the intellectual power of this younger generation, the country will remain impover-

64 Katanga Johnson and Anthony Esposito, “Afghan All-girl Robotics Team Members, Journalists Land in Mexico,” Reuters, 25 August 2021.
ished and the cycle of poverty will continue. Those with the means will take refuge in other countries and those without will endure the Taliban’s cruelty and economic difficulties for decades to come.

The United States government has lost any influence over the Taliban. Economic sanctions are the only tools left for America and its allies to hold them accountable for their actions. The Taliban 2.0 that was presented to the world in the last year are no different than the Taliban 1.0 of the 1990s. They recently announced a ban on music in public places, claiming that it is forbidden in Islam.\(^{65}\) As they set up their government, the Taliban announced that no women will fill any cabinet-level positions.\(^{66}\) Recently, Abdul Baqi Haqqani, the acting higher education minister for the Taliban, announced that girls and boys will no longer be allowed to study in one classroom.\(^{67}\) There is growing concern that the Taliban would return to their cruel treatment of women and girls, which was prevalent when the militant group controlled the country previously. For the United States and others to vouch for women’s rights or any other causes in the country, they would have to use economic aid or sanctions as a leverage against the Taliban. Both these actions would have a significant effect on ordinary Afghans who are already living in a dire economic situation. According to the World Food Programme,

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Afghanistan is on the verge of a humanitarian crisis. One in three people go hungry every day.\textsuperscript{68} Holding back food aid or imposing economic sanctions will only worsen the hunger situation, with little real impact on the Taliban’s behavior.

Leaving Afghanistan as the international community has will have long-term impacts. According to Index Mundi, the latest demographic data from Afghanistan shows that 63.5 percent of the population is younger than 24 years. There are 7.6 million Afghan children between the ages of 10 and 19.\textsuperscript{69} Today, the average age of the Afghan population is 18.6 years.\textsuperscript{70} This represents an incredible pool of recruits for extremist groups, including the Taliban, to train and equip these young minds not with knowledge but rather with radical ideologies. Recent history has made clear what happens when unemployed, dissatisfied, and uneducated young people fall victim to the Islamic State and the Taliban’s propaganda machines. Afghanistan will become a breeding ground for extremists poised to be used by forces like China, Russia, and others against the world to achieve their goals in the region and beyond.

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\textsuperscript{68} “Afghanistan: WFP Committed to Averting Humanitarian Crisis as One in Three People Go Hungry,” World Food Programme, 17 August 2021.

\textsuperscript{69} “Afghanistan Demographic Profile,” Index Mundi, accessed 31 May 2021.

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CONCLUSION

In March 2005, more than 100 countries and international agencies came together in Paris, France, to discuss the effectiveness of international aid. The overall aim was to improve the quality of aid and its impact on development in other countries. International development experts presented their professional proposals on what works and does not work with aid. As a result, the *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* was created, based on development efforts grounded in the firsthand experience of these field workers and professionals.¹

The *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* is a practical, action-oriented guide to help improve the quality of aid and its impact on development. It provides a series of specific implementation guidelines and establishes a system to ensure that donors and aid recipients hold each other accountable for their commitments. It is formulated around the following five central pillars.²

1. **Ownership**: donor recipient countries must set their own strategies for poverty reduction, improve their institutions, and tackle corruption. Recipient countries ought to own the strategic development of plans for themselves

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² *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness*, 9–10.
since they have a better understanding of local issues, obstacles, opportunities, and prospects.

2. **Alignment**: donor countries must align with strategic objectives developed by the recipient countries and use local systems to further the cause of poverty reduction.

3. **Harmonization**: donor countries must coordinate, simplify procedures, and share information to avoid duplication. The host country is best served when multiple donors coordinate their development efforts to eliminate inefficiencies.

4. **Results**: host countries and donors must place an emphasis on measuring their development results.

5. **Mutual accountability**: both donor and recipient countries are accountable for the results.

The question remains as to whether the government of Afghanistan and the international community practiced these guidelines for effective delivery of aid during the past 20 years.

At the Kabul conference in 2010, the government of Afghanistan presented a development strategy that included National Priority Programs (NPP). They also committed to undertake significant reform measures in the rule of law, elections, and human rights. In return, donors agreed to channel at least 50 percent of their aid
through the Afghan national budget. They also agreed to align 80 percent of their spending with NPP.³

At the Tokyo conference in 2012, the *Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework* (TMAF) was established in coordination with donors and the government of Afghanistan. It offered a set of commitments made by both the government and donors to act as counterbalancing influences by all parties involved in development.⁴

The London conference in 2014 was a reaffirmation of the Tokyo commitments under the TMAF. Once again, the same set of commitments were made by the donors and the Afghan government. Donors agreed to align their priorities with the government’s NPP, and the government promised to deliver on a set of deliverables outlined in the TMAF by the end of 2015.⁵

Finally, at the Brussels conference in 2016, the government of Afghanistan presented the *Afghan National Peace and Development Framework* (ANPDF) and agreed to a set of 24 deliverables under the new *Self-Reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework* (SMAF). While the acronyms of these deliverables and strategic documents changed over time, the reality on

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³ “Kabul Conference Communique” (paper presented at the International Conference on Afghanistan, Kabul, 20 July 2010).
⁵ “Afghanistan and International Community: Commitments to Reforms and Renewed Partnership” (paper from the London Conference on Afghanistan, 4 December 2014).
the ground for the poor and needy improved very little.\textsuperscript{6}

Given that each conference on Afghanistan in the last decade led to billions of dollars in aid to the country, it is imperative to assess the effectiveness of the aid based on the factors provided by the \textit{Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness}.

\textbf{Ownership}

The government of Afghanistan had developed at least two large strategic documents in the last 10 years: the \textit{Afghanistan National Development Strategy} (ANDS) and the ANPDF. In conjunction, the government had set various NPP through a consultative cabinet process. The NPP were then funded through the national budget process, and the line ministries were tasked with implementing the programs.\textsuperscript{7} The government of Afghanistan had developed a rudimentary process to claim full ownership of the development agenda in theory.

In return, donors made commitments in all the previous conferences that they would provide at least 50 percent of development aid through the government national budget and align 80 percent of their spend-


ing with the NPP. However, according to the Afghan government, during 2012–14 only $4.4 billion, or 25 percent of total development aid, had been channeled through the national budget.\footnote{8\textit{Citizens Budget} (Kabul: Ministry of Finance, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2021).} While the government of Afghanistan had made good on its promise in terms of building a national strategy, donors had failed to meet their commitment to spending through the national budget. Key funding decisions for the NPP were not made in Kabul at the Ministry of Finance or by the president’s office, but in the capitals of donor countries. This contrasts sharply with how the Marshall Plan process was conducted, in which the recipient countries were asked to develop the programs that were then funded by the plan.

\textit{Alignment}

The second aid effectiveness pillar of the \textit{Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness} calls for the alignment of donor aid with the NPP developed by the government of Afghanistan. On the surface, this should be an easy task. However, donors pick and choose parts of the NPP that were appealing to their constituents at home or to their public image around the world. For instance, the agricultural sector NPP requires massive investment for irrigation, infrastructure, market access, training, etc. A large number of donors will agree to fund the most attractive and visible portion of the program, such as the market access component. While this component receives massive amounts of aid, the irrigation, infra-
structure, and training aspects are largely underfunded or not funded at all. Market access without agricultural products or road systems means absolutely nothing to the farmer in particular and to the development of the sector at large.9

**Harmonization**

Harmonization calls for a coordinated approach to program development by donors. It asks for information sharing across the board with all stakeholders involved to avoid duplication and reduce inefficiencies. According to the Afghan government, donor fragmentation has been widespread in Afghanistan. With competing interests, donors largely bypass government systems to avoid accountability. However, several platforms including the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) have created a harmonized process for 33 donors to coordinate their activities in the country. The ARTF has remained a vital tool for pooled funding with low transaction costs, enhanced transparency, and increased accountability.10 It also provides a platform for policy debate and a consensus-building opportunity for donors and the government of Afghanistan.

**Results and Mutual Accountability**

The ultimate goal is to achieve good results from a development program. The *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* calls for results that are measurable to hold the

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9 *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness*.

parties accountable. In Afghanistan, plenty of reports, assessments, and evaluations of development programs are presented widely. However, none of them hold anyone accountable for the shortfalls or lack of development that existed. This lack of accountability has added significantly to corruption in the government and among development practitioners.11

The focus of development in Afghanistan has been primarily on the ability to deliver output rather than outcome. By focusing on output, donors and the government can easily show progress with little regard to the overall impact of their aid intervention on the development of Afghanistan. Ribbon-cutting ceremonies for newly built roads and bridges are widely attended by government officials and donor country representatives. However, when the road starts to erode or the bridge begins to crumble within a year, no one is held accountable for the poor quality of materials used.

An Aid-Dependent Economy
According to the World Bank, Afghanistan’s GDP has increased on average annually by more than 6.6 percent during the last 17 years. The largest percentage increase was in 2009, with more than 21 percent GDP growth; the lowest was in 2011, with only 0.43 percent.12 When GDP figures are compared with U.S. assistance numbers, the trend data parallels the other.

Development aid has created a heavily dependent Afghan economy, which is difficult to sustain as donor

11 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, 8.
assistance continues to decrease or dry up altogether as a result of donor fatigue (figure 41).^{13}

Most Afghans are concerned about the Taliban’s return to power in the government. They fear the nominal gains of the last 20 years, including girls returning to

\[\text{Figure 41. U.S. aid compared with Afghanistan’s GDP growth, 2009–20, USD billions}\]


^{13} Figure 41 shows the Afghan GDP growth and the U.S. aid trends from 2003 to 2019. Note that a large amount of U.S. assistance during 2010 and 2011 spurred massive economic growth. In 2018 and 2019, as foreign aid to Afghanistan decreased, economic growth contracted as well.
school, women’s rights, human rights, and freedom of speech, will be lost. However, the Taliban may not be as big of a threat to the gains of the last two decades as aid dependence, which is a major risk to the future of Afghanistan.

For example, in late 2019, the news broke that the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF) would close due to a lack of funding by USAID. The U.S. government had been the main source of funding for this university since its inception in 2006. Dr. Barnett R. Rubin, a well-known American political scientist and a leading expert on Afghanistan, tweeted in response to the closure of AUAF (figure 42).

The total cost of the Marshall Plan was $17 billion over four years. When adjusted for inflation, the purchasing power of $17 billion in 1949 is equivalent to $138.8 billion in 2019. This historic amount of aid by the United States was distributed across 16 different countries in Europe, including the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. The Marshall Plan helped jump-start the European economy, which resulted in a prosperous continent. Economic output increased by 60 percent in four years. The postwar economic development in Europe represents the most astonishing feat in modern history. While it may be difficult to draw a direct connection between American aid and the economic growth that followed, for the most part, the Marshall Plan played the role of a stimulus that triggered a chain of events leading to massive economic growth in the years that followed.16

In Afghanistan, however, the United States has spent (by some estimates) more than $1 trillion and suffered more than 2,000 U.S. troops killed and at least 20,000 injured during the last 20 years. This massive American investment in nation-building efforts in Afghanistan has generated few significant achievements and Afghanistan is no safer than it was 20 years ago.17 The Afghan economy is no better off than it was under Taliban rule in the 1990s. And as the United States has withdrawn its military presence, the faith of the country

lies at the hands of warlords, the “political elite,” and, worse yet, the Taliban.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Recommendations: Helping Afghanistan Help Itself}

Afghanistan needs an economic recovery program and not a humanitarian relief effort. The current ad hoc and humanitarian relief-oriented assistance has made little impact on the economy of Afghanistan. A different, coherent approach is defined as increased agricultural and industrial production, restoration of sound budgeting and finances, and stimulation of international trade among neighboring countries and beyond.

First, a massive intervention like the Marshall Plan with a definite timeframe is required to ignite the Afghan economy. Rather than having a donor conference on Afghanistan every four years, where limited funds are raised for development purposes, the international community must commit to a larger amount of one-time aid to Afghanistan. How the resources are gathered, pooled, and spent is just as critical. As with the Marshall Plan, the United States was the single source of aid money, and it channeled all grants through an independent funding and monitoring mechanism: the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA). The World Bank or any other multilateral organization could serve as a similar independent body to channel the funds for Afghanistan.

Second, funds must be invested heavily in areas directly or indirectly associated with the private sector. This

market-oriented development approach should include individual entrepreneurs or businesses at its heart and not the government. Businesses could be loaned money for a start-up or expansion, which could be repaid with little to no interest. The amount could then be loaned to other businesses. This more transparent cycle means that all money spent on public projects would come from loans, most of which would then be repaid to the fund. It also helps ensure a focus on restoring commercial infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, supply chains, banks, telecommunications networks, and other institutions, which would further boost economic activity.

Third, the government of Afghanistan, Talib or non-Talib, must make economic policy reforms to support its domestic private sector. These will make it easier for all businesses, from start-up entrepreneurs to mid-size manufacturing and larger enterprises, to thrive. The budget process must be reformed. It must be made more market-oriented, efficient, and transparent. Confidence in the financial market must be restored so the public can use banks to save their money, which in turn can be loaned out to businesses. All trade barriers must also be removed, thereby increasing the markets and prospects for the entire region through increased trade.

Finally, and most crucially, it must be ensured that each technical and financial assistance component contributes as directly as possible to the long-term objectives.

**Future Research**

According to former finance minister Eklil A. Hakimi, the “ultimate goal of the Afghan government must be
to achieve zero aid.”19 In other words, he would like to see Afghanistan become a self-sufficient nation capable of providing for itself without relying on foreign aid. It is necessary to investigate how this could be accomplished. Perhaps the next research project will concentrate on learning from South Korea’s experience of transitioning from desperation to prosperity, from aid recipient to aid donor country.20

In addition, at the recent 2021 G7 meeting, U.S. President Joseph R. Biden Jr. proposed that Western nations develop a plan to compete with China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The Build Back Better World initiative intends to address the enormous infrastructure needs of low and middle-income countries. The idea is to help narrow the $40 trillion infrastructure needed in poor nations that has been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic.21 Conversely, the Chinese government’s Belt and Road Initiative is feeding immense investments through various channels to fund massive infrastructure projects along the Silk Road. Because Afghanistan is strategically located along the Silk Road, it is critical to study how any government in Kabul can capitalize on the global rivalry between East and West to develop its infrastructure in tandem with its economy.


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</table>
Abid Amiri is an Afghan American currently working as an economist in Washington, DC. He was the policy director for the Ministry of Finance in Afghanistan between 2016 and 2018. Prior to joining the Policy Department, he was an economic advisor to the Minister of Finance, Eklil Hakimi. Amiri has a wide range of domestic and international work experience in the development sector. He worked as the economic affairs officer for the Embassy of Afghanistan in Washington between 2012 and 2014. Moreover, he has worked for a number of nonprofit organizations based in Washington and Afghanistan.

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