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Engage, Isolate, or Oppose

American Policy Toward the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

With the Taliban's seizure of control of Afghanistan and a developing humanitarian crisis, the United States faces a question of what policy it should pursue in the country. To inform U.S. policymakers, the authors of this Perspective explore three different U.S. policy options: to engage with the Taliban, to isolate the regime, or to oppose the Taliban by seeking to remove them from power. The authors identify the conditions under which these policies may be most appropriate and how they would best serve U.S. interests. They conclude that engagement offers the best prospect to advance American interests in the country.

On April 14, 2021, President Joe Biden announced his intention to withdraw American forces from Afghanistan. "The Taliban dealt a decisive military and political defeat to the Afghan government as the United States completed its withdrawal from the country. Over a period of 10 days, the Taliban captured the capital city of Kabul and all but one provincial capital through a combination of military offensives and negotiated surrenders with Afghan regional leaders," reported the U.S. Defense Department's Inspector General (Lead Inspector General for Operation Freedom's Sentinel, 2021). Now Afghanistan is hurtling toward a humanitarian

catastrophe, as its banking system approaches collapse, its currency is at risk of hyperinflation, and its population faces impoverishment and even starvation. The United States, which shares responsibility for these developments, needs to move quickly to determine its policy toward Afghanistan and its relationship with the new government. Failure to make a clear choice of policy orientation means persisting with the status quo by default rather than determination and risks separate U.S. agencies working at cross-purposes as they pursue distinct missions of counterterrorism, aid delivery, diplomatic dialogue, and sanctions enforcement.

The United States has two principal remaining interests in Afghanistan: the safety of the American people and the well-being of the Afghans, including but not limited to those who worked closely with the United States. Relations with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan could run the gamut from limited cooperation to outright opposition. The United States could engage the Taliban regime, seek to isolate it, or even seek to overthrow it. Determining the most desirable U.S. policy requires understanding the conditions under which these options are most appropriate

and how well each would serve U.S. interests. For analytical purposes, we begin by treating these three policy orientations as discrete options, although they might be better viewed as a spectrum of incentives and escalating pressures designed to influence Taliban behavior.

U.S. Interests in Afghanistan

With the departure of American forces and the collapse of the Islamic Republic, the United States has a continuing security interest in preventing Afghanistan from becoming a base for extremist groups bent on attacking it or its allies. It also has a moral and reputational interest not only in securing the departure of Americans and Afghans endangered because of their prior support for American efforts but also in helping the much larger number of Afghans who remain in the country to preserve at least some of the political, social, and economic gains of the past 20 years.

The first U.S. interest is to prevent Afghanistan from serving as a safe haven for terrorist groups that aim to sponsor attacks against the United States. Multiple administrations have prioritized preventing terrorism as the key U.S. interest in Afghanistan. President Biden argued that this original mission had been achieved by the time Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011 but promised that there would be a continuing U.S. effort to prevent such attacks in the future, using bases and assets outside of Afghanistan (White House, 2021a; White House, 2021b). Similarly, counterterrorism was at the center of President Trump's and President Obama's rhetoric in explaining their strategies for Afghanistan (U.S. Embassy and Consulates in India, 2021; White House, 2009).

Abbreviations

ISIS-K	the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria—Khorasan Province
NGO	nongovernmental organization
OFAC	Office of Foreign Assets Control
SDGT	Specially Designated Global Terrorist
TTP	Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan
UN	United Nations

The intensity of the U.S. interest in countering terrorism threats emanating from Afghanistan, and hence the level of resources committed to address them, depends on a judgment of the magnitude of the threats, as well as how they compare with those from other locations, such as Yemen or West Africa. President Biden explained his decision to remove U.S. forces from Afghanistan in part by arguing that the threat from Afghanistan no longer justifies the presence of U.S. forces but could be adequately dealt with by using assets and capabilities located elsewhere (White House, 2021b).

The Taliban's takeover does not obviate the threat of terrorism from Afghanistan, even though the Taliban committed to prevent attacks on the United States or its allies from Afghanistan in a February 2020 agreement with the United States ("Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan Between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America," 2020). Open sources report that the two most capable groups, al Qaeda (including its al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent affiliate) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria—Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) have some local capabilities but do not presently appear poised to strike internationally. According to United Nations (UN) reporting, al Qaeda retains close ties with the Taliban and has a current membership of "several dozen to 500 persons" (UN, 2021, pp. 12–13). ISIS-K is an affiliate of the ISIS core in the Middle East. The group emerged in 2015–2016 and grew to hold territory in eastern Afghanistan but suffered territorial losses in 2020 through a combined campaign by the Taliban, the United States, and the Afghan government. As of June 2021, UN reporting saw approximately 1,500–

2,200 fighters concentrated in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces (UN, 2021). There are also cells active elsewhere in Afghanistan, including in Kabul, where ISIS-K perpetrated a suicide bombing against the airport in August 2021 that killed 13 U.S. servicemembers and as many as 170 civilians (Nossiter and Schmitt, 2021). ISIS-K has a history of targeting the Hazaras, a Shia minority of Afghanistan, and since August 2021 it has continued attacks against this group and against its long-standing enemy, the Taliban (Sayed, 2021).

Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl provided Congress with an assessment in October 2021 that ISIS-K "could potentially" carry out attacks from Afghanistan within 6–12 months, while al Qaeda could undertake similar actions within one to two years (Shinkman, 2021). There are also terrorist groups with smaller presences in Afghanistan, including the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) or Pakistani Taliban, which has previously conducted attacks in Pakistan; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan; and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, which is a particular concern for China (Thomas, 2021).

The United States also has a moral and reputational interest in the fate of the Afghan people. This involves ensuring freedom of movement for Americans and Afghans who aided the United States and its allies and who wish to leave the country and helping those Afghans who remain to avoid a humanitarian disaster and, ideally, to preserve some of the political, social, and economic gains of the last 20 years. In a statement on September 3, 2021, for example, Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke both of U.S. efforts to enable Afghanistan to depart and U.S. "expectations" of the Taliban, such as "inclusive government" and "upholding the basic rights of Afghans,

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including women and minorities” (White House, 2021b; U.S. Department of State, 2021). As the Afghanistan Study Group wrote in a bipartisan, congressionally mandated report, “Our long involvement in Afghanistan has resulted in achievements that are in our interest to preserve” (Afghanistan Study Group, 2021). These gains had included a 75-percent increase in real income per capita, an 18-percentage-point gain in youth literacy, and gains for women and girls, including a 33-percentage-point gain in secondary education enrollment (World Bank, undated).

Although Afghanistan is often pictured as a prize in the “great game” of nations, we do not see a U.S. interest in entering a great power competition for influence there. Afghanistan has proved more a burden than an asset and is better conceived of as a common challenge than a source of great power discord.

Beyond Afghanistan, the United States has an interest in maintaining consistency in its human rights advocacy and avoiding any appearance of tolerance for Taliban misbehavior.

Alternative Approaches to Dealing with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

We next examine three broad options for U.S. policy toward a Taliban-governed Afghanistan: engagement, isolation, and opposition. We distinguish somewhat sharply among these for analytical purposes. We recognize, however, that the eventual approach chosen is likely to include elements of at least engagement and isolation, although even opposition has its adherents and might become attractive under some conditions.

Engagement

A policy of engagement with the Taliban regime offers the prospect of advancing U.S. interests to the degree that the Taliban show some willingness to engage constructively in return. Engagement would become more effective the more comprehensively it is practiced by other Western donor governments and by influential governments in Afghanistan's region and the more coordinated these governments' messages to the Taliban are. If various governments' engagement policies are not mutually reinforcing, the Taliban will likely seek to exploit differences, selectively meeting expectations of different countries. Some level of engagement would be necessary to help arrest Afghanistan's economic free fall.

Engagement would entail seeking to influence how the Taliban governs and to elicit counterterrorism cooperation through direct bilateral diplomatic and intelligence contacts, multilateral diplomacy, the possibility of some forms of assistance beyond humanitarian aid, and the possibil-

ity of sanctions relief. In its most forward-leaning form, engagement would also include official recognition of the Taliban's declared "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" as the country's government and reopening of the U.S. embassy in Kabul. In a more tentative form, this policy option would include continued operation of the diplomatic outpost that the United States has set up in Doha, Qatar, to manage Afghanistan affairs and to undertake some contacts with the Taliban. A middle ground could include restoring and routinizing the possibility for U.S. diplomats and other officials to visit Kabul and de facto treating the Taliban as the acknowledged government even without official recognition.¹

Motivation and Rationale

Even though engagement is not likely to fundamentally modify Taliban behavior, particularly with respect to their domestic policies, it offers the possibility for some satisfaction of U.S. interests. Because the Taliban has already demonstrated over the last two decades that it is prepared to absorb the costs of resisting enormous U.S. military pressure, expecting the withholding of diplomatic recognition and financial aid to yield much leverage would be unrealistic. Even if this option is unlikely to fully realize U.S. objectives, it provides a means to influence the Taliban while allowing flexibility to adapt to a changing situation in Afghanistan through variation in the intensity of engagement. Because the current situation in Afghanistan is rife with uncertainty—as to how the Taliban will govern, what challenges to their cohesion and grip on power they will face, and how severe the current economic deterioration will be—it is impossible to be highly confident about

how much or how little influence engagement might produce over time.

An engagement policy would not be irreversible and could be used in a testing-the-waters mode. However, a go-slow approach on measures to help stabilize the Afghan economy would exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in ways that could have long-term consequences in terms of Afghans' well-being and growth in anti-Western sentiment.

Engagement is the only one of the three policy approaches that would offer the Taliban positive incentives to honor their counterterrorism commitments in the agreement with the United States that they signed in February 2020—an agreement that they continue to reference as a touchstone for their relationship with Washington (Mujahid, 2021). In that agreement, the Taliban promised to prevent any groups or individuals in Afghanistan from posing a threat to the security of the United States or its allies ("Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan Between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America," 2020). The Taliban continue to call for the United States to fulfill its commitments to sanctions relief in that same agreement, indicating that they believe (or at least purport to believe) that the deal remains valid, so long as it is reciprocally implemented.

For an engagement policy to be sustained, the United States would need to define realistically limited expectations of the Taliban and ensure that all elements of the U.S. government operate within that framework.

Some level of engagement would be needed for the United States to contribute substantially to stemming the dramatic impoverishment of Afghanistan and severe deg-

radation of public services. Afghanistan already was suffering a growing humanitarian crisis as well as economic decline before the Taliban takeover, but conditions have sharply worsened since then (International Crisis Group, 2021). The United Nations Development Program has warned that “Afghanistan teeters on the brink of universal poverty,” with as much as 97 percent of the population at risk of falling below the poverty line by mid-2022 (United Nations Development Program, 2021). In September 2021, the World Food Program estimated that only 5 percent of Afghan households had enough to eat every day (World Food Program, 2021a), and a month later it assessed that Afghanistan was set to become the world’s largest humanitarian crisis (World Food Program, 2021b). Continued decline could lead to growing refugee flows or, potentially, state collapse, thereby providing a more fertile ground for terrorist groups.

Although life-saving humanitarian aid for basic needs can mitigate some of the worst effects of the crisis, the situation cannot be stabilized and the worsening of the humanitarian disaster cannot be halted unless steps are taken to reignite economic activity. Donors’ suspension of non-humanitarian foreign assistance upon the Taliban taking power, as well as the U.S. freeze of Afghanistan’s central bank reserves (held mostly by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York [Nelson and Rappoport, 2021]), has caused an enormous and abrupt economic shock, including massive job losses, a liquidity crisis, and severe constraints on the Taliban regime’s ability to pay for such requirements as civil servant salaries and imported power supplies (Trofimov and Shah, 2021). In light of Afghanistan’s extreme aid dependency (under the prior government, public spending was about 75 percent funded by foreign donors,

and foreign aid was equivalent to about 40 percent of the gross domestic product [World Bank, 2021]), state failure is unlikely to be avoided without external resources beyond strictly humanitarian assistance. Most importantly, liquidity needs to be injected into the cash-starved economy, and normalized banking operations need to resume. The United States need not itself pour cash into the economy, but it would at least need to allow the World Bank and UN to move forward with proposals that are currently being developed but that could be easily blocked by Washington.

Finally, an engagement policy would enable the United States to avoid working against the grain of its regional partners’ interests in seeing Afghanistan achieve relative stability. Notably, India has signaled that it is prepared to accept and make the best of the new political reality in Afghanistan (Haidar, 2021), as have Central Asian states with which the United States is cultivating relationships, particularly Uzbekistan. These governments signed a joint statement at an October 20, 2021, ten-nation meeting with the Taliban in Moscow (which the United States declined to attend) that called for “practical engagement” with the Taliban (Joint Statement of the Participants in the Moscow Forma Consultations on Afghanistan, 2021).

U.S. Tools and Approach

Diplomatic

Consistent diplomatic contact with the Taliban is the most basic requirement of an engagement policy. Without regular contact, the United States will be unable to clearly convey its expectations and gauge any evolution in Taliban receptivity to accommodating U.S. interests. Any kind of assistance beyond humanitarian would necessitate an understanding of conditions in Afghanistan and ability to

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monitor implementation that can only be achieved through regular diplomatic and development agency interaction with Afghan official counterparts and others working in the country. In addition, the less direct contact the United States has with the Taliban, the more Washington will be at a disadvantage as compared with more-engaged governments as all seek to influence Taliban priorities and actions in accordance with their own interests. Pakistan, China, Iran, and Russia are the most prominent among those leaning into engagement even while holding back on formal recognition for the time being.

The best way for the United States to maintain regular contact and develop insights into conditions on the ground would be to reestablish a diplomatic presence in Kabul. If the United States at some point officially recognizes the Taliban's Islamic Emirate as the government of Afghanistan, then it could reopen an embassy; before that point, the State Department could open an "office" (as it did in Pristina, Kosovo, prior to recognizing Kosovo as an independent state) or a U.S.-staffed "interests section," operating independently but nominally harbored by another state's embassy (as it long did in Havana, Cuba, in connection with the Swiss embassy).

A more minimalist engagement policy could involve maintaining the small diplomatic outpost covering Afghanistan that the State Department has established in Doha, Qatar, and authorizing official travel to Afghanistan from Washington and from Doha. Although the Taliban has so far been willing to engage with U.S. officials in Doha, its most important figures are not based there and they could become increasingly unwilling to travel regularly to Doha for meetings—an arrangement that, from their perspective, could be seen as being summoned by a reluctant interlocutor. Sustaining even limited, but more-than-intermittent, contact would likely require travel to Afghanistan.

Regardless of the intensity of engagement, the United States will need a contacts policy that identifies individuals with whom U.S. officials will not meet because their prior or ongoing activities are anathema to U.S. interests. A prime example is Sirajuddin Haqqani, whom the Taliban have put in charge of their Interior Ministry. As the key operational leader of the Haqqani faction of the Taliban, he was responsible for many of the most lethal attacks on U.S. and allied forces and on Afghans, and he is a U.S.-designated terrorist (Raghavan, 2021). As part of a contacts

policy, the United States will need to decide whether no-contact decisions based on past conduct are permanent or could be relaxed over time in the absence of ongoing activity contrary to U.S. interests.

Most governments are treating the Taliban without reservation as the de facto authority in Afghanistan, but none has yet formally recognized it. Given the inclination of all the major regional countries to accept (and, at least in the case of Pakistan, welcome) Taliban rule, decisions to recognize the regime as the legitimate government can be expected over time, assuming that the Taliban stay in control of the country. This situation would likely create pressure to credential the Taliban-designated ambassador to the UN (Nichols, 2021), giving the regime Afghanistan's seat at the UN—an important symbol of international legitimacy. The United States would then be faced with the question of whether to accept or object to the credentialing of the Taliban ambassador (even though it cannot unilaterally block such a move).² This is one reason why a policy of ambiguity about whether the United States will recognize the Taliban will have an expiration date. Eventually, though the timing is presently not possible to predict, the United States will need to clarify its stance on recognition beyond a temporizing wait-and-see mode, at which point a firm nonrecognition position would conflict with engagement.

Nonrecognition might also limit the U.S. ability to take steps to relieve Afghanistan's economic crisis, particularly potential unfreezing of the central bank reserves. But, as a practical matter, the legal technicalities of the linkage are mostly irrelevant because the political and policy considerations that would weigh against recognition are the same ones that would weigh against releasing the reserves.³

So long as the reserves remain frozen, however, this issue will remain a major concern for the Taliban and will be an obstacle to engagement.

Humanitarian and Economic Aid

Under any policy approach, the United States can and should continue to provide humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people on the basis of humanitarian principles and without regard to the political administration of the Afghan state. This type of aid is being delivered through international organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and does not require U.S. direct interaction with the Taliban. An engagement policy, however, would afford U.S. officials opportunities to discuss needs and any humanitarian access issues that arise, which could help in ensuring effective delivery of such aid.

In the interest of making good on U.S. assurances that it would stand with the Afghan people even after the Taliban takeover, Washington could offer financial support for the Afghan health care system.⁴ This is a type of aid that is not technically humanitarian and would need to be funded through development assistance, but, with the country's health care system collapsing, it would be life-saving (UN News, 2021). U.S. officials would not necessarily need to engage directly with the Taliban health ministry—to which the health care system is closely tethered—but organizations implementing a U.S. assistance effort in this area undoubtedly would need to do so. Other uses of development assistance for activities that would help restore lost livelihoods and otherwise prevent the emergence of even greater humanitarian needs could be pursued as well.

A broader program of economic aid is not per se required for the United States to pursue engagement with

the Taliban. But unless cash flows are restored to the country at least partially, there is no way to overcome the humanitarian crisis. The country will merely be lurching from one peak of a humanitarian crisis to another. As a practical matter, it would be difficult to sustain productive engagement on matters of interest to the United States if the Taliban were struggling with a severe economic crisis and the United States was declining to help. Indeed, the Taliban already are blaming the United States for the country's economic woes, a narrative that is not conducive to engagement (CBS News, 2021). Providing aid would not solve all of Afghanistan's economic problems (just as the large aid programs of the last 20 years did not), but it might undercut such a narrative, in addition to having a positive impact on Afghans' lives.

Sanctions

Existing U.S. and UN sanctions regimes are described in Box 1 and Table 1. Briefly put, these sanctions impose a variety of restrictions and prohibitions of support to the Taliban as a group, the Haqqani network faction of the Taliban, and individual Taliban figures, many of whom are now in the leadership ranks of their new regime.

Under an engagement policy, the United States would need at some point to be prepared to ease U.S. and UN sanctions. The February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement set a benchmark in this regard that the Taliban would resist revising: The United States committed to a "goal of removing" all U.S. sanctions by August 27, 2020, and to "diplomatic engagement" aimed at removing all UN sanctions by May 29, 2020 ("Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan Between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is

Known as the Taliban and the United States of America," 2020). Soon, the Taliban may no longer be open to engagement on matters of interest to the United States without U.S. willingness to move forward on sanctions relief. At a minimum, the United States would need to negotiate with the Taliban a road map for gradual sanctions relief. In the past, the Taliban has indicated that it would not accept limitations on sanctions relief in exchange for any U.S. demands.

Pressure might develop at the UN for sanctions relief, compelling the United States to clarify its position sooner rather than later, though there does not yet appear to be any rush to move in this direction, and views within the UN Security Council are divided (TASS, 2021). China has stated that at least "unilateral" sanctions on the Taliban should be removed (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021). If the United States resists showing some flexibility on sanctions, the space for an engagement policy would narrow.

Sanctions relief also would be required for the United States (and others) to help mitigate Afghanistan's humani-

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TABLE 1
Summary of Existing Sanctions

Sanction	What Is Restricted?	Who Is Sanctioned (examples from Taliban caretaker government)?	Exceptions, Exemptions, and Authority to Lift
UN Security Council sanctions (pursuant to resolutions 1267, 1988, and following resolutions)	UN member states' obligations include <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asset freeze • Travel ban • Arms embargo 	Designated Taliban individuals and entities, such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mullah Mohammad Hassan (Prime Minister) • Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar (Deputy Prime Minister) • Maulavi Mohammad Yaqoub (Defense Minister) 	Exemptions include funds for “basic expenses,” which must be submitted to the committee that oversees the sanctions. Committee has approved travel for certain individuals for peace and reconciliation. Committee makes decisions by consensus, with objections submitted to Security Council
U.S. executive orders (including 13129, 13224, 13268, 13886)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asset freeze • Prohibition on transactions 	List of Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs), including the Taliban as an organization	The Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) can issue general or specific licenses, such as existing general licenses 14 and 15 for humanitarian aid. Individuals can request removal by OFAC. State, Treasury, and Attorney General coordinate on SDGT list.
U.S. designation of the Haqqani network as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prohibition on material assistance • Asset freeze • Immigration restrictions 	Haqqani network and associated individuals, such as Sirajuddin Haqqani (Interior Minister)	OFAC can issue general or specific licenses. Secretary of State or Congress can revoke the designation.

SOURCES: UN, 2011; UN, 2015, pp. 6–8; UN, 2020, p. 4; United Nations Security Council, undated; Schorzman, 2021; Loertscher et al., 2020, pp. 25–35; Executive Order 13886, 2019; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021; U.S. Department of State, undated; Lohmann, 2019, p. 7; 8 USC 1189; 18 USC 18 2339B.

Box 1. Existing Sanctions Regimes

- **UN sanctions:** The UN sanctions regime, first established in 1999 and since expanded to include other terrorist groups, obligates member states to freeze assets, ban travel, and prevent the sale of arms to listed individuals and entities. The committee overseeing the sanctions makes decisions by consensus, although disputed issues are referred to the UN Security Council, and so any of the five permanent members of the Security Council can block changes to the sanctions. There are exemptions to the travel ban and asset freeze, including for basic expenses, such as food or medical treatment, but specific exempted expenses must be submitted for consideration by the committee. The committee can approve additional exceptions—for example, 14 members of the Taliban were permitted to travel in support of the peace negotiations in 2019.
- **U.S. sanctions under Executive Order 13224 and associated executive orders:** U.S. sanctions predate the development of UN sanctions. They were first put in place by Executive Order 13129 in July 1999, substantially expanded after the 9/11 attacks with Executive Order 13224, and revised in 2019 to authorize secondary sanctions against listed individuals and entities. Listed individuals and entities are identified in the SDGT list, which includes the Taliban as an entity and a wide range of other individuals. These sanctions require institutions to block the assets of listed individuals—or entities owned by them, acting for them, or acting on their behalf. Appropriate authorities can delist particular individuals or entities, although delisting is rare, given that it appears to be accommodating terrorist groups. OFAC, within the Treasury Department, can issue general licenses (i.e., publicly available) or specific licenses to particular entities permitting given activities. On September 24, 2021, OFAC issued general licenses to permit the delivery of humanitarian assistance or other activities that support basic human needs in Afghanistan.
- **Designation of the Haqqani network as a Foreign Terrorist Organization:** The Haqqani family was part of the Taliban but engaged in particularly heinous acts of terrorism, leading to their designation as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2012. Sirajuddin Haqqani, the deputy leader of the Taliban and Minister of Interior under the Taliban's interim government, is on an FBI most-wanted list. The Foreign Terrorist Organization designation makes it illegal for anyone under U.S. jurisdiction to provide material support to the Haqqani network and means that non-U.S. institutions may be subject to liability if they transact with the members of the Haqqani network.

SOURCES: UN, 2011; UN, 2015, pp. 6–8; UN, 2020, p. 4; United Nations Security Council, undated; Schorzman, 2021; Loertscher et al., 2020, pp. 25–35; Executive Order 13886, 2019; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021; U.S. Department of State, undated; Lohmann, 2019, p. 7; 8 USC 1189; 18 USC 18 2339B.

tarian and economic crises. General licenses have been issued already to permit delivery of humanitarian aid by government agencies and NGOs without violating U.S. sanctions, as well as authorizing noncommercial, personal remittances (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021; Office of Foreign Assets Control, 2021). “Comfort” letters to banks or other institutions indicating that OFAC will not take enforcement action could open some space for limited financial transactions. For example, in early September 2021, Western Union resumed money transfer services to Afghanistan, noting that it was continuing to engage with U.S. officials (“Western Union to Resume Money-Transfer Services to Afghanistan,” 2021). Additional potential permitted transactions could include expanded transfers to private banks, payments to Afghanistan’s neighbors to continue to provide electricity, or transactions specifically designed to fund basic services, such as health care or education (see, e.g., Byrd, 2021). But any expansion of aid beyond the strictly humanitarian sphere and beyond allowing normal economic activity to resume would require additional licenses or removal of sanctions.

Counterterrorism

Officials have said that the United States will, from a distance, watch developments in Afghanistan and strike terrorist targets if necessary (Schmitt, 2021). It is highly implausible that the Taliban, which has violently rejected U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan, would consent to overt U.S. counterterrorism actions in Afghanistan. Identifiable American attacks and targets in Afghanistan would likely result in, at least, an interruption to any constructive engagement. Even if the actions were against ISIS-K, which the Taliban opposes, the regime would be

compelled to object. The United States will therefore need to carefully consider the threat threshold for identifiably American strikes or other sovereignty-violating operations against the loss of possible cooperation via engagement.

Counterterrorism cooperation with the Taliban as part of engagement could be explored, but it is uncertain how genuine and productive such cooperation might be. There may be too little trust in both directions for much meaningful intelligence-sharing, even where interests overlap in going after ISIS-K (see, e.g., George, 2021). In part to distinguish themselves from the prior government, the Taliban will not want to be seen as doing U.S. bidding on counterterrorism or needing U.S. help (Gannon, 2021). Intelligence agencies, rather than the military, would need to lead on the U.S. side any collaboration that does occur, because of Taliban reluctance to be seen openly as cooperating with the United States in this area.

International and Regional Engagement

An engagement policy would benefit from a significant international and regional diplomacy component. The primary goals of this diplomacy would be to achieve the maximum possible consistency of expectations expressed to the Taliban on counterterrorism, human rights, and governance issues and to coordinate on plans for and delivery of aid.

All of Afghanistan’s neighbors and near-neighbors, with the exception of Tajikistan (Umarov, 2021), are already inclined toward engagement and coordinating messages to the Taliban among themselves. These messages—on counterterrorism and inclusive governance—are broadly consistent with U.S. interests. Across the board, the regional countries are more forward-leaning so far on

engagement than are the Western donors who invested heavily in Afghanistan over the last two decades, all of whom are so far limiting their engagement and proceeding slowly on any consideration of restarting their financial assistance beyond humanitarian aid. The regional countries are notably not supporting their pro-engagement stance with significant resources, however, contending that it is the responsibility of North Atlantic Treaty Organization countries to foot the bill for Afghanistan's reconstruction and development (Joint Statement of the Participants in the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan, 2021). That position is likely to prove at least an irritant as and when the United States pursues coordination with the regional governments.

Despite the divergence in initial inclinations toward engagement—reserved on the U.S. and European side and generally more eager on the regional side—there is a sufficient convergence of interests on which to build consensus on conditioned engagement. The conditions would have a lowest-common-denominator quality, and maintaining a consensus would not be easy to manage, but the United States stands to benefit if it devotes the diplomatic energy needed to try to build this consensus because collective influence is likely to be much more powerful than unilateral U.S. influence over the Taliban. The convergence of interests centers foremost on the need to motivate the Taliban on counterterrorism against groups such as al Qaeda, TTP, and others that, unlike ISIS-K, it does not see as its enemies. Another point of convergence is the importance of the Taliban broadening the composition of their regime to better reflect Afghanistan's ethnic and tribal diversity, because monopolistic rule has proven unstable in the past. Finally, there is an at least minimal shared concern about

human rights in Afghanistan such that no government engaged there would want to see a return to the most egregious practices of the Islamic Emirate in the 1990s.

Isolate

An isolate policy would seek to punish and weaken the Taliban regime and change its behavior, while signaling U.S. and broader international disapproval of that regime. An isolate strategy would involve limiting dialogue or engagement with the Taliban; maintaining and strengthening existing sanctions; and working with allies, partners, and other countries to limit potential lifelines to the Taliban regime that could inhibit the effectiveness of U.S. sanctions.

Normative reasons for isolating the Taliban would be rooted in their past behavior and in accounts of recent repression. During in the 1990s, the Taliban followed an extreme form of Islamist rule, which included the prohibition of education for women and girls, repression and killings of religious minorities, and the destruction of non-Muslim cultural artifacts. The announced Taliban interim government includes many of the individuals who were part of the government in the 1990s (Bahiss, 2021). The Taliban also harbored al Qaeda leading up to the September 11, 2001, attacks and continues to deny the links between al Qaeda and the attacks during negotiations with the United States even up to the present day (Taylor, 2019). Although the reduction in media access has made it more difficult to verify accounts of the recent Taliban behavior, there are some reports of atrocities by the Taliban, including a July attack against Hazaras and reports in late 2021 of attacks against former Afghan officials despite a Taliban-

declared amnesty (“Afghanistan: Taliban ‘Tortured and Massacred’ Men from Hazara Minority,” 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021).

U.S. Tools and Approach

Diplomatic

Under an isolation strategy, the United States would seek to limit its engagement with the Taliban and would not recognize it as the government of Afghanistan. This policy would exclude any official diplomatic footprint in Afghanistan that could be implied as legitimizing the Taliban. As with the diplomatic options described in the engagement strategy above, another country might act as a protecting power in Afghanistan for the United States. The United States would also seek to join with others to deny the Taliban representation in the UN and other international bodies.

Nonrecognition would not necessarily prevent some diplomatic engagements with the Taliban. For example, the United States had diplomatic engagements with the Taliban in the 1990s urging the Taliban to adopt a more inclusive government and expel Osama bin Laden (U.S. Department of State, 1998), even as official U.S. policy declined to recognize any group as the legal government of Afghanistan

(Anderson, 2021; U.S. Department of State, 1997). The United States also finessed issues of recognition in its negotiations leading up to the February 2020 Doha agreement—the agreement in which the Taliban is referred to as the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban” (“Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan Between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America,” 2020).

Humanitarian and Economic Aid

Under an isolate strategy, the United States would still seek to assist the people of Afghanistan, although it would need to accept a much more limited ability to achieve this goal. Humanitarian assistance would be provided only through international organizations or NGOs. Such a policy would also probably also keep a narrow definition of humanitarian aid, focusing on in-kind assistance (such as food, medicine, and temporary shelter) rather than expanding this definition to include education or health care, especially out of concern that such assistance might benefit the Taliban regime. Such humanitarian assistance would prove inadequate for the population’s growing needs.

Under an isolation strategy, the United States would seek to limit its engagement with the Taliban and would not recognize it as the government of Afghanistan.

Sanctions

A central element of an isolate strategy is the continuation and potential strengthening of the U.S. and broader international sanctions regimes outlined above. In principle, the sanctions regime would seek to put pressure on the government and government leaders while also seeking to minimize harm to civilians and permit humanitarian assistance, although any economic sanctions regime is likely to negatively impact the population.

By taking power over the government, existing sanctions on the Taliban have been effectively applied to government bodies, because any transaction with the government of Afghanistan could benefit sanctioned groups or individuals. Existing sanctions thereby provide a template for isolation of the Taliban regime by providing a tool to block foreign investment, development assistance, or other transactions that involve the central bank of Afghanistan. Isolation could permit some transactions for humanitarian assistance by NGOs or private individuals who had no connection to the Afghan government. However, any transaction that would legitimize the Taliban regime, such as the release of the \$7 billion in U.S.-held funds from Afghanistan's central bank, would undercut the goal of isolation (Nelson and Rappeport, 2021).

If the United States seeks to strengthen isolation of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, additional sanctions or greater enforcement are, of course, possible. Restricting licenses or cutting humanitarian assistance budgets for Afghanistan could be one approach. Taliban and Haqqani leadership of the government of Afghanistan also could provide a justification for OFAC to expand its enforcement on financial institutions. U.S. leverage on some of Afghanistan's trade and investment partners could be lim-

ited, however. Harsh trade sanctions against Afghanistan, mirroring restrictions on the trade in petroleum products against North Korea, for example, might be more difficult to enforce because Afghanistan might be able to receive fuel and other items from its neighbor Iran (Albert, 2019).

Of course, the more that additional sanctions are imposed, the more that the sanctions will harm Afghan citizens. Afghanistan's economy was already heavily dependent on aid. The cessation of Western development assistance and restriction of financial flows under current sanctions has already led to a growing humanitarian crisis, as noted above. Even if there are exemptions for humanitarian assistance, medicine, or other goods, the complexity and cost of complying with sanctions and the potential risk of unintentionally running afoul of sanctions will deter many private organizations from conducting business in Afghanistan.

Counterterrorism

An isolation strategy will make it more difficult to secure Taliban cooperation or even passive acquiescence to U.S. counterterrorism efforts by both limiting access to the relevant Taliban decisionmakers and reducing their incentive to cooperate. The United States would need to rely on unilateral capabilities from over the horizon, as outlined by President Biden and other U.S. defense leaders. As U.S. officials have acknowledged, the removal of troops and the U.S. embassy will make this more difficult (White House, 2021b; Washington Post, 2021; Central Command, 2021).⁵

International and Regional Engagement

To maximize the effectiveness of a more comprehensive sanctions regime, the Taliban should have as few feasible

options for external assistance and trade as possible. The United States might be able to gain approval of its preferred sanctions from European countries for several reasons: They prize their unity with U.S. policy, they have already indicated that the Taliban must make concessions to receive aid, and their close linkage with the U.S. financial system makes it difficult for them to avoid extraterritorial U.S. sanctions.

China, Russia, and Iran pose a greater challenge, especially because they have already signaled inclination to engage the Taliban. China's past cooperation with Iran has undercut U.S. sanctions, and China might do the same with Afghanistan (Grossman, 2021; Fassihi and Myers, 2021). Russia has a record of limited support for the Taliban, but it is also less likely to offer substantial assistance given its financial resources (Isachenkov, 2021). Iran has also adopted a pragmatic relationship with the Taliban at the same time as the Taliban has signaled a less oppressive policy toward the Shia Hazara minority of Afghanistan (Stancati and Amiri, 2021). These countries could offer alternative sources of diplomatic legitimacy, trade, and potentially financial assistance.

Oppose

Under an oppose strategy, the U.S. government would seek to bring down the Taliban regime. This approach would be most attractive were the Taliban found to be knowingly harboring one or more extremist movements actively preparing attacks on the United States or its allies. It would stand some chance of success if a durable internal resistance movement emerged with at least one neighboring country providing sanctuary and support. An oppose strat-

egy would involve an intensification of the isolation regime plus U.S. assistance to one or more opposition groups.

Motivation and Rationale

President Biden has been clear that, when making his decision to withdraw U.S. forces, he did not assess that there were sufficient U.S. interests in Afghanistan to justify a continued presence (White House, 2021b). An oppose strategy would be a significant step backward in U.S. policy from President Biden's decision and would not be taken lightly. It would likely come about either because the U.S. government's assessment of U.S. interests in the region had changed, or because there was significantly greater risk to the core U.S. interest of counterterrorism that could not be alleviated under engagement or isolation. It is important to recognize, however, that a collapse of the Islamic Emirate would probably lead to fragmentation, chaos, complex layers of civil war, and opportunities for operations and bases of terrorist groups amidst the greater complexity.

In particular, an oppose strategy becomes the most likely option if the Taliban government permits or facilitates terrorist attacks from Afghanistan against the United States or other Western countries. Under these circumstances, in addition to potential unilateral U.S. counterterrorism actions against terrorist groups, it could become more attractive for the United States to seek to remove the Taliban from power, because permitting them to remain in power would risk their facilitation of future attacks. Although direct U.S. strikes against the Taliban could be one component of a U.S. oppose strategy, the United States could also employ Afghan allies opposed to the Taliban, as it did in 2001.

U.S. Tools and Approach

Diplomatic

As with the isolate strategy, the United States would avoid explicit or implicit recognition of the Taliban, including any official diplomatic presence in Afghanistan. Unlike the isolate strategy, U.S. messaging under an oppose strategy might focus on the need for regime change and the illegitimacy of the Taliban regime. The United States might officially recognize an alternative government, including a government in exile or, if a plausible challenger to the Taliban emerges, a government in Afghanistan that is not the Taliban. Recognizing an alternative government, especially a government based in Afghanistan, would undermine the legitimacy of the Taliban and facilitate providing resources to groups seeking to overthrow the regime. For example, international recognition of the Republic of Yemen government enables the United States and international institutions to more easily provide assistance to that government, even though it is not in control of much of the country.

Aid and Sanctions

A policy of seeking the overthrow of the Taliban government would also likely include continued humanitarian aid. In past cases in which the United States has voiced a policy of regime change, it also permitted and offered humanitarian aid, such as offering coronavirus pandemic aid to Iran in 2020, providing humanitarian assistance through UN agencies and NGOs in Syria, and providing humanitarian aid to Iraq leading up to 2003 (“U.S. Offers Aid on Coronavirus Outbreak,” 2020; United States Agency for International Development, 2021; Zarate, 2013). As with

isolation, this aid would likely focus on in-kind contributions of food, medicine, and other goods and would avoid direct assistance to the Taliban government.

Sanctions associated with an oppose strategy are likely to be similar to those under a more extreme version of the isolate strategy, including preserving existing sanctions on the Taliban and the Haqqani network and extending enforcement. Depending on the Taliban’s behavior and the desire to avoid humanitarian impacts, additional sanctions could be levied on the Taliban regime to further weaken their control. For example, UN sanctions on North Korea place a cap on energy imports, ban certain exports, and place additional restrictions on banking (Albert, 2019). Similar sanctions on Afghanistan would place additional pressure on the Taliban but could also plunge the country further into poverty.

Counterterrorism

While the United States was working on developing anti-Taliban resistance, there would also need to be an ongoing unilateral counterterrorism mission, because an oppose strategy assumes that the Taliban is not sufficiently restricting terrorist groups. In principle, the same U.S. capabilities that are present for a counterterrorism mission could also be used to support an anti-Taliban insurgency, including collection and strike capabilities, depending on the U.S. willingness to engage directly into conflict.

To retaliate against U.S. support for its adversaries, the Taliban could use its ground forces to crush a resistance movement, as it appears to have done in the Panjshir Valley (Huylebroek and Blue, 2021). The Taliban could also restrict travel by U.S. nationals or Afghans seeking to leave

the country or crack down on political rights. Using the air forces captured from the prior regime or surface-to-air missiles, the Taliban could try to defend its airspace over Afghanistan. A response that might be even more concerning could be for the Taliban to permit al Qaeda, ISIS-K, or other terrorist groups to operate from Afghanistan or even to provide resources to strengthen these groups.

International and Regional Engagement

An oppose strategy would require diplomatic engagement to encourage Afghanistan's neighbors to join in the effort to undermine the Taliban-led government and to permit the United States to conduct its operations from those neighbors' territory. This could be particularly challenging given the reluctance of the countries in the region to provide a U.S. base for counterterrorism purposes, much less to overthrow a neighboring regime. However, attitudes could change if the Taliban were to permit or facilitate attacks on any of its neighbors.

Pakistan is likely to be a primary beneficiary of the Taliban's rule, including limiting India's influence on its border, and Pakistan will retain significant influence over the Taliban government through control of their shared border. Analysts have been skeptical about the potential for a Pakistani break with the Taliban in part because of the close relationship between the Taliban and Pakistan's religious establishment and Pakistani intelligence organizations (Threlkeld and Easterly, 2021). U.S. efforts to strengthen relations with India as part of a strategy of competition with China—a close ally of Pakistan—also make support from Pakistan for any anti-Taliban effort unlikely.

Although a growing terrorist threat could lead Russia to change its view of the Taliban, it is difficult to imagine

Russia welcoming a renewed U.S. military or paramilitary presence in the region. There are reports of discussions about potential basing of U.S. forces at Russian bases in Central Asia, but there could be significant hurdles to such an arrangement (Gordon and Lubold, 2021). Russia also retains an ability to hedge against a more threatening Taliban regime through its connections with the Central Asian states (Kofman, Stein, and Sun, 2021). Nor is any kind of cooperation with Iran likely to be on the table.

Evaluating the Alternatives

The United States will need to choose between unavoidable trade-offs as it sets a new policy course on Afghanistan. Each of the three options variously involve risks of failing to protect U.S. interests, worsening the situation in the short or long term, or incurring domestic political costs in light of controversies over losing the war against the Taliban. Nevertheless, the nature and magnitude of the risks and the potential benefits differ among the options.

Engage

The engage option is the only one of the three that has the potential to advance even marginally the two principal remaining U.S. interests in Afghanistan. Although overt counterterrorism cooperation with the Taliban regime is unlikely in the foreseeable future, only an engagement policy holds potential for sustained dialogue on terrorism concerns and for possible unacknowledged cooperation. It is also the only policy course that would enable durable counterterrorism cooperation with Pakistan, the Taliban's strongest foreign backer and an essential conduit for the

United States to keep tabs on terrorist elements in Afghanistan and to undertake any operational activity. An isolation policy or an opposition policy would return the United States to a predominantly adversarial position vis-à-vis Pakistan on Afghanistan matters.

Only engagement would also enable the United States to follow through on repeated assertions that it would continue to support the Afghan people and that it had learned the lessons of the post-Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan that American abandonment of interest in the country sowed the seeds of future disasters. The United States could continue to provide strictly humanitarian aid under the two other options, but that type of assistance alone would not stave off devastation of the economy and, thus, a persistent humanitarian crisis. Engagement is unlikely to have dramatically positive effects on how the Taliban govern Afghanistan, because the group has its own internal politics and ideology that will take precedence over the concerns of external actors. But it is the only course of the three that offers some prospect of at least marginally moderating Taliban policies and practices, because it would enable persistent dialogue on human rights and governance concerns, and because the Taliban will avoid any appearance of moderating in response to more overt pressure tactics.

Risks of engagement include that it is a more difficult policy course to implement than the other two. The U.S. administration would need to make affirmative decisions that depart from the status quo of isolation produced by long-standing sanctions, political antipathy toward the Taliban, and the immediate suspension of non-humanitarian aid upon their takeover. Engagement would also require deft diplomacy toward the Taliban and intensive efforts to

build international and regional consensus on demands of the Taliban and on aid flows.

A further risk is that the United States cannot be certain that engagement would produce desired moderation of Taliban governance and human rights-related practices and that Washington might therefore seem complicit in Taliban harms to the Afghan population. Moreover, engagement that brings resources to Afghanistan and the appearance of legitimacy and acceptability to the Taliban could reinforce the durability of a regime that might otherwise be vulnerable to stresses on its cohesion as it faces challenges of governing that exceed the challenges of fighting an insurgency. Although the Taliban appear firmly in control at the moment, it would be imprudent to assume that the history of violent competition for power has ended in Afghanistan, particularly considering that the Taliban so far are not making moves to accommodate the interests of ethnic and tribal constituencies beyond their own supporters. These risks of unintended consequences of engagement could be mitigated by continuously evaluating the results of the policy and changing course if need be.

Several risks could be avoided by adopting an engagement policy. Washington will not be able to escape responsibility for the impending humanitarian and economic disaster in Afghanistan if it does not engage. The United States had over the last two decades built up a state system, urban economy, and public services that could not survive without foreign aid, and its abrupt cutoff of those aid flows and freeze of state assets have precipitated an enormous economic shock that Afghanistan cannot mitigate without external support. The negative consequences for the Afghan people are directly, although not uniquely, attributable to these U.S. actions.

Engagement could also help avoid the risk of the United States bearing responsibility for Afghanistan's rapidly deepening impoverishment by keeping the onus on the Taliban regime to perform and undercutting their ability to deflect accountability. It would challenge the Taliban to follow through on their claims to want a cooperative relationship with the international community and deprive them of a convenient narrative that foreign powers are at fault for their governance failures.⁶

Implementing an engagement policy would require defining expectations of the Taliban and adhering consistently to those expectations. This will be difficult to achieve because U.S. and Western desires for how the Taliban performs on counterterrorism and human rights will very likely exceed Taliban willingness to comply. Taliban competence in governing would also be a limited factor for the effectiveness of an engagement policy. They lack experienced public administrators, and many civil servants have left their posts. Finally, pursuing engagement would require the United States to set aside its long-standing message to the Taliban that achieving power through military means rather than a negotiated political settlement would deny them legitimacy and financial support in favor of adhering to its equally long-standing message that U.S. support for the Afghan population would endure.

Isolate

Isolation, nonrecognition, and sanctions are standard American responses when hostile regimes oust friendly ones. These were the U.S. reactions when the Bolsheviks ousted the czar, the Communists took China, Castro took power in Cuba, North Vietnam defeated the South,

the Iranian Revolutionaries toppled the Shah, and, most recently, when the Bolivarian revolution stifled democracy in Venezuela. None of these regimes was cut short as a result of U.S. disapproval, and, in most cases, recognition was eventually granted as passions cooled and interest in engagement mounted. But this process of normalization has usually taken several decades.

The United States has already started down this well-trodden path. Its embassy in Kabul is closed, the Taliban are under international sanctions, and Washington has blocked access to most of Afghanistan's foreign exchange reserves. The Taliban's history, their reputation in the West, and existing sanctions on the Taliban may make an isolate strategy politically unavoidable. However, there are several key risks and limitations that may make isolation less desirable.

The absence of a diplomatic footprint in Afghanistan and in-country contacts with the Taliban will make it difficult to achieve U.S. interests in counterterrorism and the well-being of the Afghan people. Engagement with the Taliban in Doha or elsewhere will face inevitable limits, including making it more challenging for U.S. officials to gauge the real situation on the ground. The sanctions that underpin the isolate strategy will be harmful to the Afghan population. An isolated Taliban government is more likely to adopt a more extreme Islamist government, especially because a Western policy of isolation will weaken voices that are relatively more moderate. Declining socioeconomic circumstances in Afghanistan could facilitate the growth of terrorist groups, and a policy of isolation could make Afghans more directly blame the United States for their circumstances.

An isolate strategy is unlikely to compel a change in Taliban behavior, except perhaps for the worse. The Taliban leaders have experienced imprisonment and austere conditions, and they have prioritized their own ideology despite Western sanctions and violence. They are unlikely to compromise their core objectives based on the threat or implementation of sanctions. Although the Taliban's first preference may be to gain Western assistance, they clearly prioritize policies that will help them maintain the loyalty of their followers, and they have a demonstrated ability to live and govern under Western isolation. Furthermore, the United States is unlikely to gain support from China, Russia, or Iran to restrict aid to or trade with the Taliban government, which will undercut any Western-led sanctions. A harsh sanctions regime will likely make the Taliban less cooperative on counterterrorism and the United States less able to verify the fulfillment of its commitments in this sphere.

Oppose

There are two fundamental problems with a regime change strategy. First, it is not feasible under current conditions, because there is no viable opposition group. Second, even if it were feasible and would succeed, the United States would find itself once again supporting a dependent government in Kabul against local resistance with no better prospects of ultimate success than its last such effort. This alternative nevertheless has its champions in the U.S. Congress and in Afghanistan. There are some conditions under which this option might become attractive and even feasible. It would become attractive if the Taliban were found to be knowingly harboring extremist movements that were organizing

attacks on the United States or its allies. Under such a condition, neighboring states might be more willing to support resistance movements and/or permit the United States to assist from their territory.

None of these conditions exist at present. Working to plunge Afghanistan back into civil war would tend to draw in more-extremist groups, further radicalize the Taliban, and impose additional hardships on the Afghan people.

Recommendations

Although engagement offers the only possibility of actually advancing American interests in Afghanistan even marginally, isolation remains the default choice. It is the proverbial alternative B nestled between alternative A, surrender, and alternative C, nuclear war, in the classic caricature of a Washington options memo. Moreover, from a bureaucratic decisionmaking perspective, isolation is the relatively easier choice to make because it is predominantly the status quo (in light of preexisting sanctions, closure of the U.S. embassy, and the immediate post-Taliban takeover suspension of aid and freeze of Afghan state assets). Isolation offers a pure passive-aggressive strategy, requiring no expenditure of funds or political capital and no controversial initiatives. As noted earlier, the policy of isolation has an exceptionally poor record of influencing the behavior or improving the character of the ostracized regime. Nevertheless, it is the expected response, satisfies the need to express disapproval, and allows one to ignore what one cannot abide.

In the present case, however, a policy of isolation increases the risk of successful attacks on the United States and/or its allies mounted by Afghanistan-based terrorists.

Recognizing that the United States has already made significant steps toward isolation, we recommend beginning to rebalance the policy in the direction of engagement.

Working to ostracize Afghanistan's new government makes it less likely that the Taliban will fulfill their obligations to prevent attacks from Afghan territory. It will render the United States more dependent on its oft-cited but untested over-the-horizon counterterrorism capabilities. U.S. military and intelligence leaders have uniformly warned that this will make defense of the homeland more difficult.

A policy of isolation also diminishes the Taliban's incentive to accommodate, even marginally, international urgings to moderate its repressive behavior. It necessarily limits the range of things the United States might do in concert with the rest of the international community to alleviate Afghanistan's approaching economic collapse. Humanitarian aid—that is, the provision of food, medicine, and shelter—will not forestall hyperinflation, the disintegration of the banking system, the rapid decline of the urban economy, and the resultant population displacement, for which the United States will garner much of the blame. It is true that the Taliban, given time, may adopt policies that produce similar effects, but this crisis will occur before they have had the opportunity to do so.

Under other circumstances, it might seem sensible to let the pressure continue to grow on Afghanistan's new rulers before testing their willingness to engage, but such a stance will not keep pace with the looming economic disaster. And the domestic controversy over changing policy will only grow the longer isolation remains the norm. Recognizing, therefore, that the United States has already made significant steps toward isolation, we recommend beginning to rebalance the policy in the direction of engagement.

The United States should make the first cautious, but impactful, moves signaling an opening to engagement with a view to enabling steps to stem the steep decline in the economic situation. Measures to allow liquidity to be injected into the Afghan economy, prevent hyperinflation, and enable the banking system to operate are crucial. U.S. officials should be seen expressing concern about Afghanistan's looming economic crisis, consulting with other governments about what might be done, exploring ways to help stabilize the Afghan economy, and providing aid in ways that limit the risk of diversion of resources to other purposes. The United States and other donors should also

expand aid beyond strictly humanitarian assistance, using funds allocated for development assistance to support basic human needs by channeling resources to NGOs, private companies, and the public sector with careful monitoring and verification. Mid-level U.S. government officials might arrange to visit Kabul, perhaps with the announced purpose of engaging in technical-level discussions on economic issues and humanitarian aid delivery.

On counterterrorism, intelligence channels should be opened and routinized if they have not already been. A forum might be established, in Doha, perhaps, for the two sides to discuss further implementation of the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement.

Another early step might be quietly supporting track-two dialogue among experts and former officials to broadly explore the potential trajectories for the U.S.-Afghanistan relationship. The United States might grant visas to non-official Taliban-connected figures to attend meetings in the United States on the topic.

An engagement policy offers the opportunity to better align Western and regional approaches to the Islamic Emirate, thereby exposing the Taliban to converging and compatible regional and broader international pressures. China, Russia, Iran, and Pakistan have their own concerns about violent extremist groups operating from Afghani-

stan and can be expected to join in pressing the Taliban to prevent such activity. Although less concerned about human rights, these states will want to avoid the collapse of essential government services and to urge the Taliban to broaden the base of its government and avoid oppressing minorities.

More-substantial forms of engagement should be considered based on the Taliban's responsiveness to these initial gestures. As we have indicated, engagement is the only of these postures that is likely to advance the United States' remaining interests in Afghanistan, so it should be given a try before isolation becomes locked in, as it has so often in the past.

The Islamic Emirate is certainly not the best government Afghans can hope for, but neither is it the worst they may get. The sole remaining source of resistance to the Islamic Emirate is the Islamic State. Another alternative is no government at all, only multiple competing extremist groups, regional and ethnic militias, and proxy combatants supported by neighboring states. Such outcomes would undoubtedly be worse for the Afghan people and for the United States. An opposition strategy—that is, regime change—should, therefore, remain a last resort, and only in connection with manifestly grave terrorism concerns.

Notes

- ¹ A U.S. delegation led by Deputy CIA Director David Cohen, which included State Department officials, had the first official U.S. meeting with the Taliban since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in Doha on October 9–10, 2021 (DeYoung, 2021).
- ² The United States could object to seating the Taliban representative in the General Assembly objecting in the Credentials Committee, of which it is a member, or objecting in the General Assembly itself. Regarding credentialing procedures, see Johnson, 2021.
- ³ The U.S. government has so far indicated publicly that it does not plan to unfreeze the reserves (Psaledakis and Lawder, 2021).
- ⁴ See also International Crisis Group, 2021.
- ⁵ The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, explained in testimony that the removal of U.S. forces “makes it much more difficult for us to conduct intelligence surveillance reconnaissance find-fix functions. . . . We can still do it. It’s not impossible but it’ll make it more difficult” (“Military Leaders, Gen. Milley Testify on Afghanistan Exit: Full Hearing Transcript” Rev, September 28, 2021).
- ⁶ These claims have been made regularly both publicly and privately. For instance, on November 8, 2021, a statement distributed by a Taliban regime spokesperson to journalists and others via WhatsApp and attributed to Sirajuddin Haqqani, Minister of Interior, Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, stated: “Our war was a war of liberation which was our legitimate right. We are intending to have positive relations with the world and are committed to the Doha Agreement. We are not posing any security threat to the world and are ready to build trust with other countries.”

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About This Perspective

With the Taliban's seizure of control of Afghanistan and a developing humanitarian crisis, the United States faces a question of what policy it should pursue in the country. To inform U.S. policymakers, the authors of this Perspective explore three different U.S. policy options: to engage with the Taliban, to isolate the regime, or to oppose the Taliban by seeking to remove them from power. The authors identify the conditions under which these policies may be most appropriate and how they would best serve U.S. interests. They conclude that engagement offers the best prospect to advance American interests in the country.

RAND National Security Research Division

This Perspective was sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and conducted within the International Security and Defense Policy Center of the RAND National Security Research Division (NSRD), which operates the RAND National Defense Research Institute (NDRI), a federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense intelligence enterprise.

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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our colleagues in and out of government who took the time to talk with us for this research project. We would also like to thank our reviewers, Vanda Felbab-Brown and Andrew Parasiliti, for their helpful comments.

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