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Rethinking Pakistan's Response to Afghanistan's Humanitarian Crisis

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Key Points:

- Two-thirds of Afghanistan's population, or a startling 28.3 million people, will require immediate humanitarian assistance in 2023 as the nation enters its second year of crippling economic decline and its third consecutive year of drought-like conditions.
- Political events throughout the year 2022 have also played a critical role in shaping the attitude of the international community toward Afghanistan.
- The United Nations (UN) has launched its largest-ever single plea for USD 4.4 billion to help 20 million Afghans with food, shelter, and medical treatment.
- Following the US withdrawal in 2021, Islamabad has promised Kabul humanitarian aid totalling about USD 28 million, including 50,000 metric tons of wheat, winter shelter, and emergency medical supplies.
- China has made significant financial investments in Afghanistan, around USD 3.5 billion since 2005 and has indicated a willingness to make more substantial investments once the Taliban have taken control.

INTRODUCTION

The story of Afghanistan has encompassed many folds of failure. These many folds are attributed to internal and external factors. The international order has played a very critical role in the fate of Afghanistan. A conflict-ridden country is not only a reflection of the political dissonance of the international community; it also reveals the gigantic issue of the humanitarian crisis. Since the United States (US) withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the country has represented

a picture of doom, disaster, and destruction. The takeover of the Taliban in Kabul has been exacerbated as the world community has preferred not to recognise the new Taliban government. The gloomy chapter on uncertainty, deplorability, and hunger has begun after it in the lives of common people in Afghanistan. Several indicators support the idea that if the problem persists, a humanitarian disaster will likely occur in Afghanistan. Pakistan is one of the countries in the neighbourhood of Afghanistan that has received and will continue to receive direct impacts from the situation there. Though gigantic, the ongoing crisis has aspects of immediately doable actions that can stop the further deterioration of human suffering there. In order to analyse the situation in the neighbourhood of Pakistan, it is advisable not to see it from the monotonous aspect of Af-Pak relations against the backdrop of Pakistan's influence there but also from this deepening humanitarian crisis because it would have severe ramifications for Pakistan. The situation

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Table 1: Humanitarian needs in Afghanistan for the years 2022 and 2023

People in Need (2022)	Women	Children	Persons with Disabilities
24.4M	22 per cent	54 per cent	8.3 per cent
People in Need (2023)	Women	Children	Persons with Disabilities
28.3M	23 per cent	54 per cent	8.3 per cent

Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

is so interlinked because of its decade of unending war that one cannot ignore the security and strategic areas. Therefore, it is imperative to discuss Afghanistan's current state of affairs in terms of a humanitarian crisis.

AFGHANISTAN POST-US WITHDRAWAL

The emergence of the Taliban government in Kabul after the US withdrawal in 2021 has caused serious concerns around the globe. Those concerns basically sprouted from suspicions regarding the style of Taliban governments and their strict interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, particularly about females. In addition to it, there are cascading effects that involve the serious prospect of systemic collapse and human disaster in Afghanistan as a result of the enormous humanitarian crisis there. Along with the human costs, this humanitarian crisis is undoing many advancements made over the past 20 years, especially those pertaining to women's rights.¹

As per the recent statistics, two-thirds of Afghanistan's population, or a startling 28.3 million people as shown in Table 1, will require immediate humanitarian assistance in 2023 as the nation enters its second year of crippling economic decline and its third consecutive year of drought-like conditions while still suffering the effects of 40 years of conflict and frequent natural disasters.² The figures shown in Table 1 reflect an increase in women suffering. In 2022, 22 per cent of the people in need were women, and in 2023, there is a one per cent increase. However, 54 per cent are children, among the stated figures in both consecutive years. These numbers are devastating. In addition, 8.3 per cent of the people in need in Afghanistan are persons with disabilities (shown in Table 1).

In Afghanistan, humanitarian needs have historically been chiefly driven by armed conflict; however, in 2023, other factors will likely play a significant role, including drought, climate change, threats to women's and girls' safety, and

the economic crisis inferred from the previous year 2022 patterns of events (Table 2). In addition, political events throughout the year 2022 have also played a critical role in shaping the attitude of the international community toward Afghanistan.³ (Table 2)

International Pledges and Dearth of Capital

As the 20-year war between the Taliban and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) ended in August 2021, a new era of rapid economic decline, hunger, malnutrition, inflation caused by global commodity shocks, and sharp increases in urban and rural poverty has begun in Afghanistan.⁴ The UN has launched its largest-ever single plea for USD 4.4 billion to help 20 million Afghans with food, shelter, medical treatment, and other necessities as they struggle under the consequences of decades of conflict.⁵ Major donors included Germany with USD 218 million, Japan with USD 109 million, the US with nearly USD 204 million in new aid, and Britain with USD 374 million. According to the UN, 41 additional contributors offered funding.⁶

Direct international development assistance, which had previously accounted for 75 per cent of all public spending, including the upkeep of the public health system, was suspended as a result of the fall of the previous administration. Afghanistan will have one of the greatest youth populations in the world, with 47 per cent of the population being under 15 years old⁷ and a population predicted to cross 43 million by 2025.⁸ Therefore, interrelated environmental, economic, and protection concerns, particularly for girls, will have a far-reaching and perhaps catastrophic impact far into the future because the population is projected to expand

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Patrick Wintour, "UN Donor Conference Falls Billions Short of \$4.4bn Target to Help Afghanistan," *The Guardian*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/31/un-donor-conference-fails-to-reach-target-of-44bn-to-help-afghanistan>.

⁶ Lisa Schlein and Margaret Besheer, "Donors Pledge \$2.4 Billion for Afghan Relief," *VOA*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/donors-pledge-2-4-billion-for-afghan-relief/6510150.html>.

⁷ "Afghanistan - Demographic Trends," *Britannica*, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Afghanistan/Demographic-trends>.

⁸ "Afghanistan Population (2023)," *Worldometer*, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/afghanistan-population/>.

¹ "Afghanistan: Economic Roots of the Humanitarian Crisis," *Human Rights Watch*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/01/afghanistan-economic-roots-humanitarian-crisis>.

² "Afghanistan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023 (January 2023) - Afghanistan," *ReliefWeb*, January 23, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-overview-2023-january-2023>.

Table 2: Events in Afghanistan year 2022

Political Event	Natural Calamity	Terrorist Event
	Earthquake Jan 2022	Attacks April 2022
Donors pledge - March 2022	Earthquakes in Paktika and Khost June 2022	
Announcement of Hijab Decree - May 2022	Alarming malnutrition situation and atypical floods August 2022	
Female Participation - July 2022	Winter Prioritisation September 2022	
Establishment of cash import pipeline - November 2022		
Ban on females participating in higher education - December 2022		
Ban on women working for NGOs/INGOs - December 2022		

Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

at a pace of 2.3 per cent per year, one of the sharpest in the region.⁹ In addition, the abrupt suspension of direct development assistance, the freezing of USD 9.5 billion in central bank reserves, the disruption of markets, financial and trade institutions, and the freezing of loans all contributed to the economy’s precipitous freefall.¹⁰

Pakistan’s humanitarian standing post-US Withdrawal

Pakistan was one of the first voices to urge the international community to give Afghanistan access to its foreign reserves (along with Qatar), which were blocked after the Taliban took power, and aid the nation in times of need.¹¹ Following the US withdrawal in 2021, Islamabad has promised Kabul humanitarian aid totalling about USD 28 million, including 50,000 metric tons of wheat, winter shelter, and emergency medical supplies.¹²

In addition to humanitarian aid, a shipment of 1,800 metric tons of wheat was given to Afghan authorities at the Torkham border crossing in the northwest of the two nations.¹³ Pakistan has declined to accept a new

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “US Freezes Afghan Central Bank’s Assets of \$9.5bn,” *Al Jazeera*, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/8/18/us-freezes-afghan-central-banks-assets-of-9-5bn>.

¹¹ “Pakistan Sends Another Tranche of Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan,” *The Express Tribune*, September 12, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2319879/pakistan-sends-another-tranche-of-humanitarian-aid-to-afghanistan>.

¹² Ayaz Gul, “Pakistan Sends Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan,” *VOA*, December 30, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/pakistan-sends-humanitarian-aid-to-afghanistan-/6375649.html>.

¹³ Ibid.

wave of refugees, citing its own economic challenges. Pakistan already accommodates roughly 3 million Afghan refugees in addition to economic migrants.¹⁴ About 250,000 Afghans have fled their country and sought refuge in Pakistan since the Taliban took power in August 2021. During the summer of last year, Pakistan initiated a program to return unauthorised migrants to their home countries.¹⁵

Role/Interest of China

China has made significant financial investments in Afghanistan, around USD 3.5 billion since 2005 and has indicated a willingness to make more substantial investments once the Taliban have taken control.¹⁶ Beijing immediately sought “friendly relations” with the Taliban government after the US withdrawal. Chinese wanted to secure their support in order to control East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)-affiliated Uighur insurgents from Afghanistan.¹⁷ Beijing views them as a major security concern not only for internal stability but also for its trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Shah Meer Baloch and Ruchi Kumar, “Pakistan Crackdown on Afghan Refugees Leaves ‘Four Dead’ and Thousands in Cells,” *The Guardian*, March 2, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/mar/02/pakistan-crackdown-on-afghan-refugees-leaves-four-dead-and-thousands-in-cells>.

¹⁶ “China Regional Snapshot: South Asia,” *Committee on Foreign Affairs*, accessed May 4, 2023, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/china-snapshot-project-south-asia/>.

¹⁷ AFP, “China Says Ready for ‘friendly Relations’ with Taliban after Rout,” *France 24*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210816-china-says-ready-for-friendly-relations-with-taliban-after-rout>.

(BRI) and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).¹⁸ China's role as Afghanistan's primary aid provider and investor is paramount to post-war reconstruction efforts.¹⁹ The Taliban has distanced itself from Uighur terrorists and threatened to crack down on ETIM affiliates in Afghanistan due to China's close relationship with the present Kabul government.²⁰

BARRIERS TO HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

The situation for the people of Afghanistan appears to be deteriorating even further, almost two years after the Taliban gained control of Kabul. The economy is struggling, malnutrition is increasing, women's rights are being violated, and widespread displacement and migration exist. Although physical safety has improved, there has been a consistent rise in attacks by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), causing instability and insecurity. Unemployment is rampant throughout the country. Despite facing numerous challenges, the Taliban refuse to comply with the demands and conditions of the international community. This makes it difficult for the world to influence their actions.

Pakistan's association with the Taliban has been complicated, as it had previously provided support to the group while they were in power. However, Pakistan has also backed the Afghan government and other stakeholders over the years. A major worry for Pakistan is the security situation in Afghanistan, as any turmoil in the country could potentially affect Pakistan as well. Furthermore, Pakistan has been struggling with the issue of refugees, with millions of Afghans seeking refuge in Pakistan over the years.

The Taliban have encountered various difficulties in governance, including the obligation to offer fundamental services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure to the populace. The Afghan economy has also been seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and years of conflict. Some barriers are highlighted below:

1. The Afghan economy has struggled in recent times, with sanctions against Taliban leaders and natural disasters such as drought and floods causing further

¹⁸ Furqan Khan, "US-China-Pakistan: Aid and Interests in Afghanistan," *U.S.-China Perception Monitor*, February 23, 2022, <https://uscnpm.org/2022/02/23/us-china-pakistan-aid-interests-afghanistan/>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Yaroslav Trofimov and Chao Deng, "Afghanistan's Taliban, Now on China's Border, Seek to Reassure Beijing," *WSJ*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/afghanistans-taliban-now-on-chinas-border-seek-to-reassure-beijing-11625750130>.

harm.²¹

2. The Afghan reserves remain frozen and are now being held in a trust,²² making it unlikely that the Taliban will ever have access to them. A US judge has recently ruled against claimants seeking parts of the reserves as damages for the 9/11 attacks.²³
3. While there have been improvements in security and power consolidation under the current interim government, reports of human rights abuses and arbitrary exercise of power remain.²⁴
4. The Taliban initially implemented less regressive policies towards media and women's education, but these policies were not institutionalised and were quickly reversed. Women are now barred from university education.²⁵
5. The Taliban claim to have reduced corruption, but this may be a result of foreign aid stopping, which was the primary source of corruption funding. There are reports that the Taliban are raising funds through smuggling and money laundering via the Kabul airport.²⁶
6. Public executions, floggings, and other human rights abuses have been reported, indicating that the Taliban are reverting to their past barbaric ways.²⁷

To move forward, the Taliban must confront these challenges and create a competent government that can manage the country's affairs, establish institutional capacity, and tackle corruption and mismanagement.

For the international community as well, one of the most significant concerns is the humanitarian crisis, which has been exacerbated by years of conflict. The

²¹ William Byrd, "One Year Later, Taliban Unable to Reverse Afghanistan's Economic Decline," *USIP*, August 8, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/08/one-year-later-taliban-unable-reverse-afghanistans-economic-decline>.

²² James Politi and Benjamin Parkin. "US Creates Fund to Disburse \$3.5bn of Frozen Afghan Bank Reserves," *Financial Times*, September 14, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/726700ca-8b64-408c-82c6-ed8c9303b1fc>.

²³ "US Court Rules Plaintiffs Cannot Seize Afghan Reserves," *Central Banking*, February 24, 2023, <https://www.centralbanking.com/central-banks/governance/7954592/us-court-rules-plaintiffs-cannot-seize-afghan-reserves>.

²⁴ "Afghanistan: Taliban Threaten Revenge Killings," *Human Rights Watch*, March 22, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/22/afghanistan-taliban-threaten-revenge-killings>.

²⁵ Belquis Ahmadi and Hodei Sultan, "Taking a Terrible Toll: The Taliban's Education Ban," *USIP*, April 13, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/taking-terrible-toll-talibans-education-ban>.

²⁶ Barnett R. Rubin, "Afghanistan Under the Taliban: Findings on the Current Situation," *Stimson Center*, October 20, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/afghanistan-under-the-taliban-findings-on-the-current-situation/>.

²⁷ "Security Council Emphasizes That Punitive Restrictions on Women's Rights, Escalating Hunger, Insecurity Taking Devastating Toll in Afghanistan," *United Nations Press*, March 8, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15222.doc.htm>.

international community has responded by offering aid and assistance to address the urgent needs of the Afghan people, such as food, shelter, and healthcare.

Another issue is the potential for terrorist and extremist groups to use Afghanistan as a base for their activities. The Taliban's previous support for terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda has raised concerns about the possibility of the country once again becoming a safe haven for such groups.²⁸ The assassination of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri by a US drone in July 2022 highlights the Taliban's failure to uphold the fundamental principles of the agreement.²⁹

For Pakistan, the threat is mainly the presence of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). From a strategic standpoint, Taliban-controlled Afghanistan is considered "strategic depth" for the TTP fighters. Whenever the Pakistani military launches an operation against TTP fighters, they flee to Afghanistan, where the Taliban provide them with safe haven. By allegedly providing refuge to TTP fighters, the Taliban violated the Doha Accords, where they agreed not to harbour any terrorist organisations on Afghan territory. This violation makes it even less likely for them to receive official recognition or substantial humanitarian assistance and support from the international community. Moreover, the US freezing of Afghan assets worth USD 7 billion will remain in place until the Taliban proves that they are not providing shelter to international terrorist groups.

The incidents of firing from across the border into Pakistan have escalated, causing the closures of the Chaman border.³⁰ Additionally, assassination attempts on the Pakistani Head of Mission in Kabul also occurred,³¹ resulting in Pakistan recalling its Ambassador and demanding assurances of safety before his return.³²

DISCUSSION

The existing situation in Afghanistan has become a real humanitarian challenge in front of the world community. The country is mainly affected by the conflict that has remained there for decades. In addition to it, social and

²⁸ Lindsay Maizland, "The Taliban in Afghanistan," *CFR*, January 19, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/background/taliban-afghanistan>.

²⁹ Robert Plummer and Matt Murphy, "Ayman al-Zawahiri: Al-Qaeda leader killed in US drone strike," *BBC*, August 2, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-62387167>.

³⁰ "'Unprovoked' Firing from Afghan Forces Kills Civilians: Pakistan," *Al-Jazeera*, December 11, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/11/unprovoked-firing-from-afghan-forces-kill-civilians-pakistan-chaman>.

³¹ "The Pakistani embassy in Kabul was attacked, and one was injured," *Reuters*, December 2, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-says-kabul-head-mission-target-attack-embassy-2022-12-02/>

³² Steven Ganot, "Pakistan's Ambassador to Afghanistan To Return After Assassination Attempt," *The Media Line*, April 17, 2023, <https://themedialine.org/mideast-daily-news/pakistans-ambassador-to-afghanistan-to-return-after-assassination-attempt/>.

natural hazards like droughts, earthquakes, and poverty have worsened the situation. The Security Council has passed two important resolutions pertaining to Afghanistan that include an extension of the mandate of the UN and an independent assessment in terms of recommendations to tackle the diverse challenges confronted by Afghanistan.³³ Afghanistan and its problems have been in political discourse around international affairs, particularly South Asian politics. However, international policy on Afghanistan lacks the identification of the problem where the convergence of all stakeholders, local and international, have disparate approaches. In order to navigate through the problem itself, it has been noticed that Afghanistan's issue has become the victim of a political narrative where stakeholders mostly focus on the political interpretation of the conflict that eclipses the tangible solutions to avert the humanitarian crisis there.

To have a plausible solution to the issue, the current situation invokes help from the gap analysis method, which identifies the goal of ascertaining the future from the existing conditions.³⁴ Opting for it actually helps to identify the gap between the two situations. As per the condition and figures provided by the different organisations in Afghanistan mentioned in Table 1 and Table 2, data-driven decision-making could help to navigate through the political differences of stakeholders. Therefore, this paper suggests including an analytical approach based on data-driven policymaking through the inclusion of gap analysis.

Additionally, one cannot leave the political moves on the ground where the Taliban feel they have won against the US after a long period of war and economic sanctions. Therefore, they are not likely to be influenced by pressure. To deal with this situation, the US should collaborate with China, Iran, Pakistan, India, and the UN to develop a shared strategy for engaging with the Taliban and achieving widespread recognition of their government. However, due to certain reasons, such as political tensions, the US cannot currently work closely with Russia and Iran, despite some shared interests in Afghanistan.

Additionally, the immediate prospects for Russia and Iran are fraught with uncertainty. Russia has not achieved victory in its conflict with Ukraine, while Iran is facing a new challenge from women-led protests

³³ "Security Council Extends Mandate of Special Political Mission in Afghanistan, Requests Independent Assessment of In-Country Efforts, Adopting Two Texts," *UN Press*, accessed April 28, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15230.doc.htm.2023>,

³⁴ Andrej Verity, *Humanitarian Gap Analysis Purpose, Definition and Products*, (Draft: OCHA, January 2014), 1-7, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/toolbox/files/1.%20Intro%20Doc%20Humanitarian%20Gap%20Analysis%20-%20Its%20Purpose%20Definition%20and%20Products.pdf>.

and the declining health of its top leader. Meanwhile, Pakistan is grappling with various crises, including economic, political, and environmental issues, as well as the ousting of leaders from two major political parties. These factors do not augur well for the effectiveness of international relations.

Pakistan has no alternative but to maintain its interaction with the Taliban in order to tackle security and terrorism concerns. Pakistan understands that it cannot manage the situation in Afghanistan single-handedly and is collaborating with China, the Gulf States, and other countries to ensure the continuation of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. Pakistan has also resolved not to acknowledge the new government unilaterally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The projections of humanitarian needs in Afghanistan for 2023 could be met more in concurrence with the following recommendations:

- The Afghanistan problem is not a regional issue only; it has evolved into a conflict-turned-humanitarian crisis. Therefore, a two-pronged strategy is needed that can address political and humanitarian issues together.
- China can play a very positive role in bringing normalcy to the region by bridging the gap between Western countries and the Taliban government.
- Avoid Endorsing the Taliban's Restrictive Policies
- Emphasise Security and Border Issues
- Encourage Engagement without being the Taliban's Spokesperson
- Continue Humanitarian Assistance
- Adopt a Regional Approach toward Engagement with Afghanistan
- Aim for Regional Economic Integration