



ISSUE BRIEF #3 » PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

Support Long-term Afghan-led Solutions

Afghanistan still depends upon foreign assistance for its survival.¹ Even Taliban leadership has acknowledged that Afghanistan will require international development aid moving forward.² Interestingly, it was not the withdrawal of Soviet troops but the cessation of Soviet aid that led to the dissolution of then-President Mohammed Najibullah's regime.³

Thus, U.S. economic and development assistance remains a key avenue for supporting lasting peace in Afghanistan even after troops are fully withdrawn. This support is especially critical as the novel coronavirus pandemic spreads across the globe, exacerbating the suffering of the Afghan people.

However, it is important to acknowledge that development assistance can also cause harm. As the Washington Post's *Afghanistan Papers* tell us, prior U.S. development efforts in Afghanistan have entailed

"flood[ing] the fragile country with far more aid than it could possibly absorb. During the peak of the fighting, from 2009 to 2012, U.S. lawmakers and military commanders believed the more they spent on schools, bridges, canals and other civil-works projects, the faster security would improve. Aid workers told government interviewers it was a colossal misjudgment, akin to pumping kerosene on a dying campfire just to keep the flame alive."⁴

A human rights worker in Afghanistan said the country "is in many ways a perfect case study of how not to give aid."⁵

The United States should make a long-term development commitment to Afghanistan that reflects local priorities, strengthens local ownership, and promotes oversight and accountability by

Going small

Pouring too much aid too quickly into Afghanistan has heightened corruption and violence. This has weakened the Afghan government and strengthened the Taliban's hand. Studies demonstrate that a large-scale approach in conflict zones results in minimal, if any, economic or political progress.⁶

Smaller, more tailored programs that reflect local priorities, are focused on local needs, and are implemented by local partners have a much better record of success.⁷

Read the Issue Briefs

*Support Full Military Withdrawal from Afghanistan*³

Ramp Up Bilateral and Multilateral Diplomatic Efforts

Support Long-term Afghan-led Solutions

Oppose Continued Militarized Counterterrorism in Afghanistan

Putting development professionals in the lead

In Afghanistan, USAID has been directed by the State Department and the Pentagon—often against the better judgment of development professionals—to focus its efforts on big, flashy projects that Afghans are unable to sustain or do not need.⁸

Moreover, much of the spending has been administered by military officials and units with little knowledge and understanding of development principles and best practices.⁹ U.S. assistance to Afghanistan should be designed to achieve meaningful development objectives, overseen and managed by development professionals, and evaluated according to its development impact.

Avoiding waste and inefficiency

Too much of U.S. assistance to Afghanistan has been lost to waste, fraud, and abuse.¹⁰ Moreover, because aid has been routed through U.S.-based companies and organizations, a large portion of it has been eaten up by security costs, reducing amounts that directly benefit the Afghan people. Small cash transfers directly to households have proven quite successful in stimulating economic growth and protecting vulnerable populations in many countries around the world.¹¹

To ensure that funds are reaching those who need it and are achieving their intended goals, the administration should make aid flows fully transparent not only to Congress and the American people but also to the Afghan government and intended beneficiaries, and ensure they are subject to rigorous monitoring and evaluation standards.

Taking corruption seriously

For too long, the United States has allowed its economic and military assistance to fuel corruption in the name of shoring up the war effort and supporting the Afghan government. There has been tremendous pressure on U.S. agencies to spend large amounts of money in order not to lose their future budgets, which has resulted in poor oversight over who was receiving the money and what they were doing with it.¹²

Instead of mapping out the kleptocratic networks and taking care to avoid bolstering them, successive U.S. administrations have turned a blind eye to the funds flowing to the Taliban, terror groups, and corrupt officials.¹³ This has built resentment among the Afghan people toward both the Afghan government and the United States, undermining the prospects for achieving a stable peace.¹⁴

Placing clear conditions on assistance

Economic assistance is a key point of leverage, as Afghanistan requires external support to survive. Yet the United States has thus far been hesitant to condition aid on certain outcomes or to push for accountability through its assistance. Any

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direct support to the Afghan government should be conditioned on progress toward outcomes such as protections for women and girls in the spirit of the Afghan constitution; security sector reform; disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation, and reintegration (DDRR) for former fighters; good governance; and the rule of law.

Conducting robust oversight

Congress should use the full extent of its oversight authorities to consistently examine the efficacy and impact of assistance programs, investigate fraud, and adjust accordingly.¹⁵ At the same time, Congress should remove the incentives for USAID and other agencies to spend money too quickly and to fabricate success stories in order to preserve their future budgets and justify their continued work.

Without aggressive oversight to ensure that American dollars are actually getting to the right places, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) warns that our “programs will at best continue to be subverted and at worst will fail.”¹⁶

Working multilaterally

More than 60 nations have contributed to post-9/11 development efforts in Afghanistan.¹⁷ Thus, an aim of U.S. diplomacy should be working multilaterally with other donor nations to leverage aid to Afghanistan in support of outcomes furthering peace and stability. With so many regional actors playing a role in Afghanistan’s economy and society, not to mention their influence upon one another (such as China’s leverage over Pakistan), the U.S. must recognize that unilateral efforts to tailor and condition aid are much less likely to succeed than multilateral agreements on shared goals.

Make aid flows fully transparent not only to Congress and the American people but also to the Afghan government and intended beneficiaries.

What Members of Congress can do:

- Support a long-term development commitment to Afghanistan, working multilaterally when possible.
- Exercise robust oversight, including through hearings, legislative reporting requirements, and information requests, to continually assess whether assistance is tailored to local needs and meeting realistic development metrics.
- Authorize and appropriate multi-year funding to avoid programmatic uncertainty and remove incentives to push funds out the door too quickly.
- Properly resource and empower development professionals to do development work and get the U.S. military out of the business of providing foreign assistance.

Further reading

- *Lessons Learned* report series (Arlington, VA: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2015-2019).
- Catherine Lutz and Sujaya Desai, “US Reconstruction Aid for Afghanistan: The Dollars and Sense,” *Brown University Watson Institute Costs of War Project*. January 5, 2015.
- Craig Whitlock, “Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War,” *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019.
- Madeline Rose, “How Peacebuilding Can Replace Endless War,” *Responsible Statecraft*, December 18, 2019.

Endnotes

1. World Bank, "Financing Peace: Fiscal Challenges and Implications for a Post-Settlement Afghanistan," December 5, 2019.
2. Sirajuddin Haqqani, "What We, the Taliban, Want," *New York Times*, February 20, 2020.
3. Shane Smith, "No more '92s: Lessons for U.S. Afghanistan Policy from the Post-Soviet Withdrawal and the Najibullah Regime it Left Behind," Air Force Fellow, Air University, March 2013, pp. 4, 9.
4. Craig Whitlock, "Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019.
5. Joel Brinkley, "Afghanistan: How not to give aid," *Politico*, July 25, 2012.
6. Christoph Zürcher, "What Do We (Not) Know About Development Aid and Violence? A Systematic Review," *World Development* Volume 98, (2017): 506-522.
7. Jason Lyall, "Civilian Casualties, Humanitarian Aid, and Insurgent Violence in Civil Wars," *International Organization* Vol 73, Iss. 4 (2019): 901-926; *Private Sector Development and Economic Growth: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (Arlington, VA: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2018), p. 189; *To Fight Corruption, Localize Aid: How US Foreign Assistance Can Support a Locally Driven Fight Against Corruption* (Washington: Oxfam America, 2015); Alice Speri, "The US Just Can't Stop Blowing Billions in Afghanistan," *VICE*, April 2, 2014.
8. Craig Whitlock, "Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019.
9. *Private Sector Development and Economic Growth: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (Arlington, VA: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2018), p. 168.
10. Catherine Lutz and Sujaya Desai, "US Reconstruction Aid for Afghanistan: The Dollars and Sense," *Brown University Watson Institute Costs of War Project*. January 5, 2015; Joel Brinkley, "MONEY PIT: The Monstrous Failure of US Aid to Afghanistan," *World Affairs* Vol. 175, No. 5 (2013): 13-23.
11. Justin Sandefur, "Cash Transfers Cure Poverty. Side-Effects Vary. Symptoms May Return When Treatment Stops," *Center for Global Development*, April 19, 2018; Dennis Egger, et. al., "General equilibrium effects of cash transfers: experimental evidence from Kenya," Working paper, November 21, 2019; Rema Hanna, et. al., "The Medium-Term Impact of Conditional Cash Transfers on Health and Education in Indonesia," *Abdul Latif Jemeel Poverty Action Lab*, May 2018.
12. Craig Whitlock, "The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019.
13. Ibid. ("We communicated almost exclusively with government officials, delivered development resources through their agents, hired their relatives and cronies, bought gravel and T-walls and gasoline and intelligence from them, and often used their armed thugs.")
14. "Afghan Government 'Nowhere Near' Able to Self-Fund: Sopko," *TOLO News*, January 29, 2020. ("The last thing these local "partners" wanted was for the United States to turn off the spigot of money and weapons with which they were enriching themselves and their patronage networks...And so no Afghan leader had an incentive to succeed. Predictably, a strong partner with real resolve did not emerge.")
15. *Stabilization: Lessons Learned from the U.S. Experience* (Arlington, VA: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2018), p. 204. ("Congress should use its oversight authority to scrutinize how U.S. funds are being spent and to what effect. Representing U.S. taxpayers, Congress sets the tone for a contingency operation's expected return on investment.")
16. *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons Learned from the U.S. Experience* (Arlington, VA: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2016).
17. *Private Sector Development and Economic Growth: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (Arlington, VA: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2018), p. 13.

For more information, please contact Heather Brandon-Smith, legislative director on Militarism and Human Rights at HBrandon-Smith@fcnl.org.