

How foreign intervention paradoxes have harmed Afghanistan

by Nematullah Bizhan

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The international community has played a significant role in Afghanistan since 2001, which can be delineated into three distinct phases. The period from 2001 to 2018 is characterised as an era of intervention, reconstruction, and state-building. The period from 2017 to 2021 saw efforts to minimise engagement and seek a political settlement between the Taliban insurgents and the then-Afghan government. Since 2021, there has been disengagement and efforts at re-engagement.

Following the ousting of the Taliban regime in late 2001, according to the [World Bank](#), Afghanistan received about US\$90 billion in development aid up to 2020 from the United States and other bilateral and multilateral donors. This aid was instrumental in kickstarting the nation's recovery, including increased life expectancy, improved infrastructure, economic growth, and expanded access to education and basic health services. Despite the suspension of development and military aid with the return of the Taliban to power in August 2021, donors have pledged approximately US\$8.3 billion in humanitarian aid from 2021 to the present, according to the [UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#), to address the escalating humanitarian crisis in the country.

Throughout these several periods, the role of the international community, mainly dominated by the US, has involved paradoxes, contradicting their objectives of stabilising Afghanistan and preventing it from once again becoming a safe haven for terrorist groups. These foreign intervention paradoxes, which have unintentionally undermined many of the gains made in the past two decades after 2001 and posed risks to Afghanistan's future, can be categorised into three distinct waves.

The first wave occurred from 2001 to 2017. During this period, the US and its allies largely bypassed the Afghan government by establishing parallel institutions both fiscally and politically. Over half of the aid bypassed national institutions, largely prioritising donor interests over national priorities. While corruption and state weakness mainly contributed to such an approach, bypassing the government

proved counterproductive. In my book, *Aid Paradoxes in Afghanistan: Building and Undermining the State*, three relevant foreign intervention paradoxes are documented: a shift in government accountability from citizens to donors; a divergence in the relationship between state and society; and the fragmentation of tax system. Such an approach by bilateral donors unintentionally deprived the state of necessary investments and reforms, prolonging state weakness and fragility.

The second wave of paradoxes, from 2018 to 2021, repeated past mistakes instead of heeding the lessons from them. This period involved a process of negotiating a political settlement and the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. However, the US replicated the same approach that in some cases had undermined development and state-building in Afghanistan. The US government **bypassed** the then-elected Afghan government and other national institutions, negotiating directly with Taliban insurgents. Despite growing concerns about the consequences of a rushed deal and the full withdrawal of the US forces without change of conditions in Afghanistan (even by **the former US diplomats to Afghanistan**) the **US signed a deal with the Taliban** in February 2020. However, no progress was made with the ceasefire and political settlement, which were the two main provisions of the agreement. With the withdrawal of US forces, the republican regime collapsed on 15 August 2021, jeopardising many of the gains Afghanistan had made since 2001. The collapse of the republic was multifaceted, with the US-Taliban deal playing a significant role. The deal stripped the Afghan government of necessary legitimacy and decision-making power, reduced aid and military support, and created confusion among local and regional actors.

The third wave of foreign intervention paradoxes began with the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. The Taliban dismantled the 2004 Constitution of Afghanistan and imposed restrictions on women, including a ban on education beyond year six and employment, except for limited exceptions such as in the health sector—mirroring policies imposed under their first rule between 1996 and 2001. In response, the US and other Western donors cut development and military aid to Afghanistan. Although humanitarian and some development aid were provided to address humanitarian crises and sustain critical services, two relevant intervention paradoxes emerged.

First, while humanitarian aid prevented humanitarian crises from deepening and the economy from collapsing, sanctions imposed on Afghanistan weakened the economy and perpetuated poverty. Second, the international community's engagement with the Taliban without a clear path forward perpetuated the absence of the policies it purported to advocate for, including safeguarding women's fundamental rights and establishing an inclusive government.

Despite a **high-level meeting of foreign envoys for Afghanistan**, convened under the chairmanship of the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in Doha on 17 and 18 February 2024, there was no achievement of a clear roadmap for international engagement with Afghanistan or the appointment of a UN special envoy to the country. This outcome primarily stemmed from disagreements among the permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Amid the contributions made by the international community, particularly through the provision of development and humanitarian aid, the three waves of foreign intervention paradoxes in Afghanistan illustrate the unintended, and in some cases harmful, consequences of external intervention. The future of Afghanistan is hanging in the balance. There is no easy pathway for the country to escape the cycle of fragility, conflict, and repression, and no straightforward strategy for the international community to help address these crises. These paradoxes, however, underscore the importance of learning from past mistakes and adopting more informed and inclusive approaches to international engagement and national processes in Afghanistan and perhaps similar contexts.

Adopting a long-term perspective that prioritises the needs and aspirations of Afghan citizens from all walks of life is imperative. This approach must be guided by a clear roadmap aimed at achieving lasting stability and ensuring dignity and prosperity for the people of Afghanistan.

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