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TRUMP'S PERSPECTIVE ON AFGHANISTAN: HUMANITARIAN CRISIS AND REGIONAL CHALLENGES



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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



TRUMP'S PERSPECTIVE ON AFGHANISTAN: HUMANITARIAN CRISIS AND REGIONAL CHALLENGES

Introduction

There is no doubt that U.S. policies toward Afghanistan have always been complex, shifting with changes in administration. Among these, Donald Trump's approach to Afghanistan remains one of the most debated and controversial aspects of American foreign policy. While his actions on the global stage have drawn both supporters and critics, his policies in the region—particularly in Afghanistan—have created uncertainty about the country's future, given its key role in regional security and economic dynamics.

During his first term, the Trump administration pursued a combination of military pressure and diplomacy, ultimately leading to the signing of the Doha Agreement with the Islamic Emirate and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan.

Now, in his second term, Trump has taken a different approach, including threats to suspend humanitarian aid, demands for the return of U.S. military equipment from the Islamic Emirate, and a tougher stance on Afghan refugees. This raises an important question: will Trump's new policies strengthen U.S. influence in the region, or will they further fuel Afghanistan's ongoing crisis?

We must first examine Trump's past engagement with Afghanistan to better understand these policies. We will then analyze his current approach in his second term and how it reflects the future of Afghanistan—a topic that has become a focal point in his speeches.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF TRUMP'S RELATIONSHIP WITH AFGHANISTAN

During Donald Trump's first term as president, his policies toward Afghanistan were shaped by a desire to reduce military costs and withdraw American troops. Initially, his approach involved applying military pressure on the Islamic Emirate to force it into negotiations. However, this ultimately led to a peace agreement. Signed in Doha in February 2020, the agreement outlined a gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces and included commitments to lift sanctions and release 5,000 prisoners.

Trump, who frequently emphasized his pledge to "end endless wars," hailed this deal as a major foreign policy achievement. However, concerns remained regarding the enforceability of its terms. The Islamic Emirate, for its part, pledged to sever ties with terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, but reports continued to suggest that some level of connection persisted—an allegation the Islamic Emirate consistently denied. Trump also issued a stern warning, stating that if the Islamic Emirate violated the agreement, the U.S. would return with "unprecedented force." This approach reflected a dual strategy: on the one hand, pushing for troop withdrawal while, on the other, keeping the threat of military action on the table.



While this strategy was effective in reducing the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, it also undermined the Afghan government's authority. The peace talks between the Islamic Emirate and the Afghan government faced repeated delays and challenges, further weakening Kabul's position.

The withdrawal process was set in motion in a way that left the Biden administration with little choice but to follow through. Ultimately, this led to the collapse of the Afghan Republic in 2021. Many analysts argue that Trump's decision to sign the peace deal without the active involvement of the Afghan government paved the way for the Islamic Emirate's resurgence.

Although the initial prospect of a U.S. troop withdrawal raised hopes among many Afghans, the unfolding events demonstrated that these hopes were not without serious concerns. The broader U.S. approach to Afghanistan made it clear that the transition would not be as smooth or stable as many had initially expected.

POTENTIAL POLICIES OF TRUMP IN THE NEW U.S. ADMINISTRATION

Now that Trump has returned to the White House for a second term, the question arises: how much will his policy toward the Islamic Emirate (Taliban) change? Given Trump's unpredictable personality and tendency to make impulsive decisions, it is difficult to definitively predict his stance. However, some believe that Trump may increase pressure on the Taliban to form an inclusive government, while others hope he will work to improve bilateral relations with the Islamic Emirate. Before he announced certain positions, it was speculated that he might condition humanitarian aid on specific changes given the humanitarian and economic crisis in Afghanistan.

Now that his stance on temporarily suspending aid to Afghanistan—despite the country's dire humanitarian situation—has become clear, alongside his other views on Afghanistan, it is evident that Trump has specific demands for an Afghanistan under Taliban rule. These demands have been hinted at in various ways from time to time. Here, we will discuss some of Trump's key actions and policies toward Afghanistan:

Temporary Suspension of Aid to Afghanistan

Trump has temporarily suspended all U.S. foreign aid, including to Afghanistan, except Israel and Egypt, for 90 days. This decision has raised significant concerns about the humanitarian needs in Afghanistan, as millions of people in the country rely on international assistance. The Ministry of Economy told TOLO news that the activities of 50 aid organizations have been halted due to the suspension of U.S. aid to Afghanistan. Abdul Latif Nazari, the Deputy Minister of Economy, has called on countries around the world, including the United States, not to politicize humanitarian aid. Mr. Nazari stated, "The suspension of activities by several aid organizations due to the halt in humanitarian assistance by the new U.S. administration is affecting humanitarian efforts. For this reason, we urge countries, including the United States, not to politicize humanitarian aid."

The World Food Program (WFP) in Afghanistan has also warned that the suspension of U.S. aid and the reduction in international funding have pushed one-third of Afghanistan's population into acute



hunger. David Beasley, the Executive Director of the WFP, expressed deep concern over any potential cuts to aid for Afghanistan, describing the level of need in the country as extremely high. He called on the international community to consider the needs and conditions of the Afghan people when making and implementing any decisions regarding Afghanistan.

Following the closure of 50 aid organizations in Afghanistan, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) has announced the suspension of its operations in 12 countries, including Afghanistan. In a statement, the organization revealed that the U.S. State Department had issued an immediate directive to halt all activities related to financial aid.

According to an Associated Press report, this directive stems from an order issued by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, which was shared via telegram with all U.S. diplomatic missions worldwide. The order marks the beginning of the implementation of an executive decision signed by Donald Trump upon his return to office.

Previously, Martin Griffiths, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, had responded to the Islamic Emirate's ban on women working in foreign aid organizations by stating that the UN could no longer continue sending financial assistance to the group. In an interview with the BBC, Griffiths confirmed that humanitarian aid to Afghanistan had been cut off, warning that this decision would impact the livelihoods of approximately 28 million Afghans.

Over the past three years, the United States has provided more than \$2 billion in aid to Afghanistan under the Islamic Emirate's administration, primarily in the form of cash shipments ranging from \$32 million to \$40 million. However, beyond the immediate impact of aid cuts, the closure of these aid organizations will leave hundreds of Afghans unemployed—many of whom are the sole providers for their families.

Meanwhile, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has reported that in the current year, 14.8 million Afghans—roughly one-third of the country's population—are in urgent need of food and agricultural assistance. Earlier, in its January 6 report, OCHA expressed concern that 22.9 million Afghans, or nearly half the population, require humanitarian aid this year.

TRUMP'S DEMAND FOR THE RETURN OF U.S. MILITARY EQUIPMENT FROM AFGHANISTAN

Former U.S. President Donald Trump has reiterated his demand for the return of military equipment left behind in Afghanistan, including aircraft, military vehicles, and communication tools. These assets have become a key source of power for the Islamic Emirate, and their removal could weaken its military capabilities, making it more difficult for the group to combat terrorism and address border tensions.

Since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Trump has consistently pushed for the retrieval of these military supplies. Most recently, in his final speech before the inauguration, he set a condition for



continued U.S. aid to Afghanistan, stating that the Islamic Emirate must return American military equipment.

A BBC report, citing the Pentagon, revealed that military gear worth over \$6.5 million was left in Afghanistan after the fall of the previous government. This includes more than 9,000 pieces of ammunition, mostly non-precision types. The report also states that of the 96,000 military vehicles provided by the U.S. to Afghan forces, over 40,000— including 12,000 Humvees—are now under the control of the Islamic Emirate. Additionally, out of more than 400,000 firearms sent by the U.S., around 300,000 remain in Afghanistan.

The report further highlights that nearly all communication equipment, including fixed and mobile stations, commercial and military radio systems, and encryption devices, were left behind. Moreover, most night vision devices, surveillance tools, biometric systems, and GPS trackers—along with approximately 42,000 specialized military items—are still in Afghanistan.

Despite U.S. demands, Abdul Qahar Balkhi, the spokesperson for the Islamic Emirate's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has firmly rejected the idea of returning the equipment. He stated that "the people will not bargain over their national assets," emphasizing that these military supplies are now part of the Afghan government's resources and will remain under its control.

Reports also indicate that around 46 Afghan military aircraft were flown to Uzbekistan during the U.S. withdrawal. Some of these aircraft were later transferred to Uzbekistan, while last week, seven Black Hawk helicopters belonging to the former Afghan army were moved from Uzbekistan to the U.S.

Ultimately, it seems unlikely that the real purpose of raising this issue is to reclaim the equipment. Instead, analysts suggest that it serves as a means of pressuring Afghanistan to comply with U.S. demands.

The Strategic Importance of Bagram Air Base

Bagram Air Base was one of the largest U.S. military bases in Afghanistan, playing a critical role in American military operations in the region. However, after nearly two decades of presence in Afghanistan, the United States abruptly abandoned the base without informing Afghan commanders. The withdrawal took place overnight, with the power cut off, leaving Afghan forces unaware of the departure for over two hours. General Mir Asadullah Kohistani, the Afghan commander of Bagram, later told the Associated Press that rumors of the U.S. exit began to circulate, and by 7:00 AM on July 2, 2021, the news was confirmed. When U.S. forces left, approximately 5,000 prisoners—many of whom were members of the Islamic Emirate—were still being held at the base.

The loss of Bagram has been a lingering concern for former U.S. President Donald Trump, who has frequently spoken about its strategic significance. In a recent speech, he described Bagram as one of the world's largest air bases and criticized the withdrawal, calling it "shameful." He also suggested that the loss of Bagram was connected to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, arguing that the Biden administration's decision to abandon the base created geopolitical instability.



Trump further claimed that China has now taken control of Bagram and pointed out its proximity—about an hour away—to China’s nuclear infrastructure. He stated, “I intended to keep one of the largest air bases in the world, but they abandoned it.”

While Trump has expressed regret over losing Bagram, officials from the Islamic Emirate have repeatedly emphasized that they will not allow even a single piece of Afghan territory to be handed over to foreign powers. Nonetheless, some analysts believe that the idea of regaining control over Bagram could be part of a broader U.S. strategy to reassert influence in the region, particularly in monitoring China, Russia, and Iran. If so, Bagram may remain a key point of leverage in future U.S. interactions with Afghanistan.

The Impact of Donald Trump's Executive Order on Afghan Refugees

Donald Trump’s recent executive order, which has suspended the refugee admission program for 90 days, has had far-reaching consequences for thousands of Afghan refugees. This decision halted evacuation flights for over 40,000 Afghans holding Special Immigrant Visas (SIV), leaving many stranded in countries such as Pakistan, Qatar, and Albania, unsure of their future. In addition, the U.S. State Department has stopped financial support for organizations that assist with the resettlement of SIV holders in the United States.

This suspension has not only made the resettlement process even more difficult for Afghans left behind after the U.S. withdrawal in 2021 but has also placed them in a state of uncertainty. At the same time, it has given host countries like Pakistan and Iran leverage over the Islamic Emirate. These governments have historically used mass arrests and forced deportations of Afghan refugees as a means of political pressure.

Trump’s decision aligns with his "America First" policy and extends to cuts in foreign development aid. Estimates suggest that between 40,000 and 60,000 Afghans are still trying to reach the U.S., including the families of former military personnel, many of whom are women and children. While human rights organizations and refugee advocacy groups have urged the U.S. government to create exceptions for vulnerable groups, there has been no clear response from the administration.

Meanwhile, Pakistan has forced the return of approximately 800,000 Afghan refugees since mid-2023. Recent data indicates that in January alone, around 18,000 Afghans returned from Pakistan to Afghanistan, raising concerns that even more pressure will be placed on those still waiting for resettlement in the U.S.

Although Trump’s executive order does not explicitly target a specific nationality, its impact has been particularly harsh on Afghan refugees seeking asylum in the U.S. While the return of skilled Afghan professionals could be seen as a positive development, there are concerns that these returning refugees could be used as a tool of pressure against the Islamic Emirate. Until a new policy is announced, thousands remain in limbo, facing an uncertain and precarious future.

The Role of Critics of the Islamic Emirate in Trump’s Cabinet and the Ankara Meeting



The inclusion of critics of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in Donald Trump's new cabinet could have a direct impact on Washington's policies toward Afghanistan. These figures, known for their hardline stance against the Islamic Emirate, are likely to advocate for stricter measures, including the reduction or suspension of humanitarian aid, particularly if the Emirate is accused of misusing such assistance.

In this context, the recent meeting between a U.S. delegation and former Afghan leaders in Ankara, Turkey—organized by the U.S.-based Global Peace Institute—holds particular significance. The primary objective of the meeting was to explore the prospects for intra-Afghan negotiations and the formation of an inclusive government. The discussions indicated that both sides remain open to continued engagement and dialogue.

This meeting can also be interpreted as part of Trump's broader strategy to exert increased pressure on the Islamic Emirate while strengthening support for opposition factions. The Trump administration appears to be working toward establishing a new diplomatic framework for Afghanistan, potentially offering alternative approaches to engagement with the country.

At the same time, officials of the Islamic Emirate are unlikely to remain passive. They are expected to make efforts to repair relations with the United States and engage in negotiations to address American concerns, seeking to maintain their diplomatic standing while navigating the evolving geopolitical landscape.

INCREASED U.S. PRESSURE ON THE ISLAMIC EMIRATE AND REGIONAL CHALLENGES

The political pressure exerted by Donald Trump's new administration on the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan could significantly impact the policies of neighboring countries toward both Afghanistan and the United States. These pressures, which may include economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and even potential security threats, will directly affect regional economic, security, and diplomatic relations.

Strict U.S. sanctions could limit Afghanistan's trade with countries such as India, Pakistan, and Central Asian nations. At the same time, powers like China, Russia, and Iran may seize this opportunity to expand their economic influence in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, countries dependent on U.S. aid might find themselves under pressure to reduce their engagement with the Islamic Emirate or align their stance with Trump's policies in regional meetings and official statements.

Pakistan, for instance, appears to be adjusting its policy toward Afghanistan in line with Trump's position, particularly concerning U.S. military equipment left behind in Afghanistan. A spokesperson for Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently expressed concerns about the presence of these military assets in Afghanistan, signaling an effort to align with Washington's perspective.

As a result, countries like Pakistan may seek to exploit Trump's policies to advance their interests in Afghanistan. This evolving geopolitical landscape suggests that the U.S. approach under Trump could reshape regional dynamics, with various actors adjusting their strategies accordingly.



In terms of security, increased U.S. pressure on the Islamic Emirate could lead to further instability in Afghanistan, creating opportunities for terrorist groups to expand their activities in the region. This growing insecurity may force countries like Pakistan and Iran to reconsider their border and security policies to prevent potential threats.

Additionally, economic and political deterioration in Afghanistan could trigger a new wave of migration toward Iran, Pakistan, and Central Asia. This influx of refugees may lead to social and economic strain in these host countries, increasing tensions within their societies. In response, some neighboring nations might impose stricter policies to limit the entry of Afghan refugees, which could escalate diplomatic tensions between Kabul and regional governments.

Ultimately, U.S. pressure could also reshape political alliances in the region. Countries like Pakistan may adjust their stance on the Islamic Emirate to maintain their relationship with Washington. Meanwhile, China, Russia, and Iran could strengthen their ties with the Islamic Emirate to counter U.S. influence in Afghanistan.

Internally, these pressures may also deepen divisions within the Islamic Emirate. Some factions may advocate for greater engagement with the international community, while others may push for a more rigid and isolationist approach. If fully implemented, these policies will not only affect Afghanistan but also have significant consequences for the broader political and security landscape of the region.

CONCLUSION

Donald Trump's approach to Afghanistan, particularly during his first term, reflected a mix of military disengagement and economic and diplomatic pressure. On one hand, he aimed to reduce military spending and end prolonged wars, limiting the U.S. role in Afghanistan. The 2020 Doha Agreement, which led to the withdrawal of American troops, was seen as a significant step in this direction. However, the exclusion of the Afghan government from the negotiations and weak enforcement mechanisms prevented the agreement from achieving lasting peace or establishing a government recognized by the international community.

Looking ahead to a possible second term, Trump's policies—such as cutting humanitarian aid, suspending refugee programs, and demanding the return of U.S. military equipment—could further worsen Afghanistan's humanitarian and economic crises. These measures would not only increase hardships for the Afghan people but also strain U.S. relations with Afghanistan's neighboring countries, which would have to navigate the consequences of these policies. While the Islamic Emirate seeks international recognition and internal stability, such pressures could deepen Afghanistan's suffering, leading to a humanitarian catastrophe rather than meaningful political change.

Overall, Trump's policies toward Afghanistan are unlikely to achieve their intended goals. Instead, they risk deepening the country's humanitarian, economic, and political crises. His dual approach—reducing U.S. military involvement while simultaneously exerting pressure on the Islamic Emirate and politicizing humanitarian aid—fails to provide a viable solution for Afghanistan's challenges. The



country's future will largely depend on internal developments and the role of other global powers. Given Afghanistan's strategic significance, no single global power will be able to resolve its crises alone. A collaborative and balanced international effort will be essential for Afghanistan's stability and progress.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The international community, particularly the United States, must continue providing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and avoid politicizing humanitarian issues.
2. The global community, led by the United States, should clarify its stance on Afghan refugees and pressure countries to prevent the mass and forced deportation of Afghan migrants.
3. The United States, in shaping its policies toward Afghanistan and exerting pressure on the Taliban, must prioritize human rights and their protection to prevent further humanitarian crises.
4. This is an opportune moment for the Taliban to reconsider its domestic policies and take meaningful steps to include diverse segments of society in the governance structure.

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