Why Would Washington Assist the Afghan Taliban?

When the US decided to withdraw its military forces from Afghanistan in mid-2021, Joe Biden assured his Afghan counterpart, Ashraf Ghani, of full US support against the Taliban (banned in Russia) to preserve the so-called “democratic” gains the country made during twenty years of US occupation. Evidence that we have previously examined clearly indicates that the US badly failed in its two most fundamental objectives in Afghanistan: defeating the Taliban and reconstructing the war-torn nation. With various US presidents having clearly misled their own people with regards to the war in Afghanistan, believing Biden’s words for siding with the people of Afghanistan forever could only be naïve. As it stands, the Biden administration is not only not siding with the people of Afghanistan, but is also imperceptibly supporting the Taliban, including the Haqqani network it once considered its most dangerous enemy in Afghanistan.

On Wednesday, 2nd February the US treasury department issued some “clarifications” with regards to the possibility of transferring aid – including financial aid – to Afghanistan even if it includes transactions, contracts, agreements involving the Taliban and/or Haqqani network. That the US did not want to publicise this development is evident from the fact the treasury issued new guidelines as “frequently asked questions – newly added.”

While the US official narrative is that they want to “help” the people of Afghanistan to survive the economic crisis looming large over Afghanistan, the US could have very well “helped” these beleaguered people with aid transferred via the UN or other dozens of NGOs and agencies working in Afghanistan. Washington, on the contrary, decided to take an alternative route that leads directly to better ties with the Afghan Taliban. The question, therefore, is: why?

Against the context of fast developing regional scenario - in particular with regards to brewing tensions between
Washington and Moscow over NATO’s expansion to Ukraine, and with China over Taiwan – the US appears to have rediscovered the strategic importance for Afghanistan, even if it is led by the Taliban, to advance its interests in a more effective manner. Therefore, even though the US continues to emphasise that they will not recognise the Taliban, the steps it is actually taking point to gradual legitimization, if not outright recognition, of the Taliban as a de facto and de jure government of Afghanistan.

Therefore, by explicitly using sanctions relief and wide ranging exemption as a diplomatic tool, the US is wooing the Taliban, which is significant for two reasons. First, the Taliban regime needs external help to legitimise itself. It needs financial help to survive politically, which it cannot get on a scale it needs without the US sanctions relief. Secondly, both Russia and China have not yet decided to recognise the Taliban because of the latter’s failure to crack down on transnational jihadi networks. That the US has nonetheless decided to co-opt the Taliban/Haqqani network shows how Washington is not only helping the regime to survive, but also using the same help as a tactical manoeuvre.

The US government supported think-tanks are already producing a narrative that supports this line of action. The United States Institute of Peace is at the centre of this new narrative, drawing people’s attention to “positive” steps the Taliban regime has taken vis-à-vis improving the financial situation of Afghanistan. The irony of the matter is that the USIP is now defending the same regime the US – and most of the EU – has been criticising ever since it took over in August 2021 for being too “exclusive” and too “rigid.” The Taliban regime has taken no steps to include Afghanistan’s various, non-Pashtun ethnic groups into its decision-making circles. As far as gender inclusivity is concerned, the Taliban have already confirmed that their Islamic Emirates will not offer secondary education to girls.

Also, the Taliban regime has not taken any steps to eliminate either the ISIS-K, the ETIM (terrorist organizations, banned in Russia) or other transnational jihadi networks. Although Taliban officials have been claiming that terrorism has reduced in Afghanistan, it is obvious to many observers that level of terrorism in Afghanistan during winters is always low. Even Taliban’s own insurgency against the US and Kabul would have slowed down in winters every year, with “spring offensive” every year being the official start of fighting season. Given that the Taliban have not undertaken any meaningful operations against these groups, it is difficult to believe that these groups have died out on their own.

The US knows that the Taliban regime has not taken these steps. Even though it does not have the CIA on the ground in Afghanistan, it still has access to information via, for instance, the Norwegian Refugee Council, which has an extensive network comprising thousands of field workers and is known to have kept a durable relationship with the Taliban over the years. The US policy is, therefore, not being shaped by mere goodwill; it is based on an active assessment of the situation and how best it could be used to Washington’s advantage vis-à-vis its global strategic competitors.

Therefore, the fact that the US has decided to extend support to the Taliban/Haqqani network means that the US no longer considers transnational terrorist networks based in Afghanistan as a threat to its interests. At the same time, Washington is quite unlikely to heed any objections that Russia or China may have with regards to allowing the Taliban to consolidate their rule without first eliminating transnational extremists.

Therefore, although the Biden administration only recently celebrated the killing of the head of the ISIS in Syria, it is obvious that Washington is following a very different anti-terrorism policy in Afghanistan insofar as it is now supporting a group it once considered the most brutal of the Taliban factions.

Quite obviously, the US motivation behind changing its policy is to prevent the Afghan Taliban from leaning too much towards Afghanistan’s neighbours – Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran – and instead lure them into its new strategic game.

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