

Afghanistan and the way forward: Incorporating indigenous knowledge into policymaking

Zulfia Abawe¹ | Bilquees Daud² | Haqmal Daudzai³ | Moheb Jabarkhail⁴ | Farooq Yousaf⁵ 

¹University of South Wales, Newport, UK

²O.P. Jindal Global University, Haryana, India

³University of Erfurt, Erfurt, Germany

⁴Centre for International for Private Enterprise (CIPE), Washington, DC, USA

⁵swisspeace, Basel, Switzerland

Correspondence

Farooq Yousaf, swisspeace - Statehood and Conflict, Basel Basel 4000, Switzerland.

Email: farooq.yousaf@swisspeace.ch

Abstract

In recent history, wars guided by external policies and interests, both regional and global, have been fought in Afghanistan. In the process, human security was ignored and indigenous knowledge and bottom-up approaches to resolving conflicts for sustainable peace were neither required nor mobilised for the benefit of the Afghan people. Because of these factors and since the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, not only did the Taliban consolidate their position in many rural parts of the country but also propagated their extreme (and often incorrect) religious narratives to gain wider public support. With the Taliban back in power after the US withdrawal in August 2021, Afghanistan has reverted to the pre-2001 situation, with policy makers and humanitarian agencies concerned about the socioeconomic gains—especially education and gender rights—made during the two decades of coalition presence in the country. Against this backdrop, swisspeace organised a roundtable discussion on 5 May 2022, in Basel, where Afghan policy experts and scholars spoke on various issues faced by Afghanistan today and presented, in the form of policy recommendations, a way forward for the war-torn country. The panel highlighted the need to focus on and incorporate indigenous voices and prioritise the interests of the Afghan people and women in policy-making and establishing sustainable (positive) peace in the country.

1 | AFGHANISTAN UNDER THE TALIBAN (2.0)

In recent history, wars guided by external policies and interests, both regional and global, have been fought in Afghanistan (see, e.g., Rubin, 1997; Shahrani, 2018). In the process, human security was ignored and indigenous knowledge and bottom-up approaches to resolving conflicts for sustainable peace were neither

required nor mobilised for the benefit of the Afghan people. Owing to these factors and since the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, not only did the Taliban consolidate their position in rural parts of the country but also propagated their extreme (and often incorrect) religious narratives to gain wider public support. Similarly, for the international community, the foreign intervention in Afghanistan started with the failure of organising an 'inclusive' Bonn Conference that hasted

Author names mentioned in alphabetical order (by surname). All authors contributed equally to this piece.

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to impose an externally agreed political arrangement on Afghanistan and ended with a 'Peace Deal' in Doha in 2020 between the US government and the Taliban at the expense and exclusion of the democratic Afghan government, civil society, and Afghan women (Sharan, 2013; Yousaf, 2022). These processes embodied two decades of confusion, ambiguity, and a unilateral top-down approach that ignored indigenous knowledge and socio-political and economic realities in Afghanistan.

After two decades of the US and coalition presence, the Taliban managed to regain control of Afghanistan in August 2021. After their return to power, the question asked by many was, and still is, 'what went wrong in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021?' Multiple factors have fuelled the re-emergence of the Taliban insurgency shortly after they were ousted from power in late 2001 (Yousaf & Jabarkhail, 2022). Although imposing Western-style, state-building projects in the Global South, international state builders often ignore the local historical context and socio-political dynamics of a country that is very critical of the questions of legitimacy and the political stability of a state (De Guevara, 2012, pp. 1–9). The US and its Western allies' lack of understanding of the Afghan context and failed peace and state-building policies led to USA's longest war, the collapse of the Afghan democratic state, and eventually the return of the Taliban to power. The US and its NATO allies did not have a clear plan for state building in Afghanistan after the 2001 invasion. It was the power vacuum and the fear of yet another bloody civil war in the country that made the USA call on an ad hoc committee to initiate the Bonn conference (Rubin, 2004). At the Bonn conference in 2001, the UN, instead of making peace between the main hostile parties—Taliban militias and the Northern Alliance warlords—engaged directly in the nation and state building in Afghanistan (see Daudzai, 2021). The foreign intervention, therefore, undermined indigenous voices in policy-making, creating a governance vacuum and letting regional powers intervene in the country. For instance, Pakistan's vital interests in Afghanistan were tied to the former's hostile relations with India and the latter's nonrecognition of the Durand Line—a historically disputed border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan understood that recognition of the border was not possible under the Afghan democratic government, which favoured India as a major trade partner, thus making the Taliban regime a better alternative for Islamabad. As a result, the Pakistani military establishment tacitly provided support to the Afghan Taliban, particularly the Haqqani Network, against the coalition and Afghan forces in Afghanistan. This support, among other major factors, played a major part in the Taliban's return to power.

The return of the Taliban to power, however, was expected after the Trump administration's Doha peace deal in February 2020, and the unconditional

withdrawal of the Biden administration on 31 August 2021. After the Doha deal, regional powers had also accelerated their political efforts as they were certain that the Taliban would have a dominant share in the future government, if not absolute power. Moreover, during this time, Pakistan was allegedly supporting the Taliban fighters, letting them freely move across the border and also get treatment in Pakistani hospitals (Noorzai, 2021). However, there was little to no action from the coalition forces against this movement. Additionally, even before the Taliban's takeover, Iran, China, Turkey, Pakistan, and Russia formally and informally invited and/or engaged with the Taliban leadership to discuss the future of bilateral diplomatic ties. Today, all these states have some form of diplomatic and economic ties with the Taliban's de facto regime. However, with the Taliban back in power, the rights of women and minorities—a red line for the international community—now stand at risk of being undermined. The Afghan media, once vibrant in the region, has come under serious censorship from the Taliban. Therefore, the international community now bears the responsibility of not abandoning Afghanistan and preserving various gains made towards human rights, especially women's rights and education, made in the past two decades. Of the many gains is access to modern education for girls, especially in the urban centres, which, after the Taliban's takeover, is now at a standstill.

Against this backdrop, swisspeace organised a roundtable discussion on 5 May 2022, in Basel, where Afghan policy experts and scholars spoke on various issues faced by Afghanistan today and presented, in the form of policy recommendations, a way forward for the war-torn country. The panel highlighted the need to focus on and incorporate indigenous voices and prioritise the interests of the Afghan people and women in policy-making and establishing sustainable (positive) peace in the country. This policy brief presents a summary of major arguments—focusing on international and human security and girls' education—put forward at the roundtable, followed by selected major policy recommendations on the way forward for the war-torn country.

2 | TALIBAN'S RETURN AND ITS IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL AND HUMAN SECURITY

Over the years, especially since the 1970s, Afghanistan's wars and instability have made a significant contribution to global insecurity and, in turn, have further debilitated the country. These wars also contributed, in some way, to the collapse of the Soviet Union and now it seems no different in terms of the West's, and particularly the US's, failure in foreign interventions. Moreover, the changing security relations between the EU and the US are alarming for international security as more traditional/

realistic approaches are gaining currency. This means that Western powers are now shifting resources from human security to national security. This shift also has the potential of having a debilitating effect on the current situation in Afghanistan that could destabilise the country for decades to come and, as a result, negatively affect global security. After two decades of coalition presence in Afghanistan and its subsequent withdrawal, we now find that military approaches are not the answer to contemporary global dilemmas (especially fighting terrorism and preventing cross-border conflict spillover and migration). Dialogue and engagement should be encouraged and practised. Also, more actors from civil society should be empowered and encouraged to participate in the process. This is because Afghanistan's instability throughout history played a major role in disrupting hegemonic power ambitions and contributed significantly to the collapse of major empires, thus often making it the 'graveyard of empires' (see Jones, 2010). It contributed to the end of the Cold War and indeed the end of the Soviet Union itself (Roberts, 2009).

The Afghanistan crisis further brought the EU and US security alliance under scrutiny. Growing concerns have been echoed across Europe about reliance and at times overreliance on the US defence capabilities. Humanitarian and security experts have expressed concern over the USA's unilateral decision-making without consulting its European allies and gaps in coordination, proper consultation, and communication throughout the US and NATO's intervention in, and withdrawal from, Afghanistan. The Afghanistan debacle has further led to strong reactions against interventions, especially military interventions, in foreign territories by world powers. Thomas Klein Brockhoff, Vice President of the German Marshall Fund of the USA and Director of its Berlin Office, in an interview with Carnegie Europe argued that

the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan is certainly not helping the ongoing debate about Germany's contribution to international security and the country's role in the world. The debate is regressing... Rather than engaging in an evaluation of the Afghanistan mission's failures, the critics simply conclude that it is better not to intervene (Dempsey, 2021).

Rami Khouri also makes a compelling analysis of the situation, suggesting that Afghanistan is not on top of the list for the USA and its Western allies anymore. He sees a more rational attitude among Western officials and the public, which means they will wait and see what the Taliban are going to do to establish a mutual relationship (Wilson-Center, 2021). This attitude has been observed during some official and unofficial visits by Taliban representatives to Europe, including

Norway and Switzerland (Yousaf, 2022). However, irrespective of global engagement, the Afghanistan failure raises important questions about the US-led coalition's failure in the war-torn country, which has further aggravated the dire situation of human (in)security in the country.

The state of human insecurity has worsened since the Taliban's takeover and the US-led coalition's disengagement in Afghanistan. Afghans now grapple with biting economic and humanitarian crises, poverty, and autocratic governance. The prevailing human insecurity is a direct result of poor governance from successive Afghan governments in the past and misaligned traditional security-centric Western policies toward Afghanistan. For most of the 20th century, the US-led Western policy was to curtail the Soviet Union's communist influence in Afghanistan and beyond to the South Asian region. In the 21st century, the West continued to concentrate primarily on pursuing security objectives to contain and confront radicalisation in Afghanistan. These policies involved covert and overt operations, including direct military engagement as well as supporting the formation of local militia and military forces. Limited attention was paid to improving human security caused by prevalent poverty, economic underdevelopment, and decades of poor governance. The decades-long war in Afghanistan absorbed significantly more financial resources than human development and human security. The Western coalition's financial spending on the war totalled more than \$2 trillion and the financial commitment to build and maintain human security in Afghanistan was only a few billion (Costs-of-War, 2022). The result was that both the war in Afghanistan and the traditional focus on building state-centric security failed.

Since the Taliban's takeover, the US-backed coalition has decided to practically abandon the country and its people. The US has also imposed sanctions on Afghanistan and members of the Taliban regime, making it difficult for international aid and assistance to reach the country. The Biden administration has also sanctioned Afghanistan's nearly \$7 billion national reserves in US Federal Banks. As a result, the Central Bank of Afghanistan is failing to control currency fluctuations as well as a prevailing inflation crisis. Both crises have hit the ordinary Afghan people hard. As a result, ordinary Afghans have limited access to their funds in the private banks of Afghanistan owing to liquidity issues. Furthermore, unemployment rates have spiked because of the withdrawal of international NGOs, donor agencies, and international financial institutions such as the World Bank. The private sector is grappling with greater uncertainty and many businesses have been forced to close. The prevailing drought and flooding, as well as the COVID-19 global crisis, have added to the problems of the Afghan people, who are living through a humanitarian crisis and an economic meltdown. Recent surveys show that, in addition to large-scale

internal displacement, more than 50% of Afghans prefer migrating to other countries (Ray, 2022). This could become a serious global security and humanitarian concern if human insecurity continues and remains unnoticed in Afghanistan.

The Biden administration's decision to split and retain Afghanistan's national reserves adds to the difficulties of human security in Afghanistan. This use of the Afghanistan national reserves for the purposes indicated by the Biden administration can unleash further currency and exchange rate fluctuations in Afghanistan, create hyperinflation as the Afghani currency will lose the reserves as its main backing, and the banking crisis could further deteriorate as banks will not have access to their portion in the reserves either (Savage, 2022). Subsequently, an exodus of people, in millions to other countries including the West, could become a real test for the global community. Furthermore, the destitute human insecurity situation including prevailing poverty and economic meltdown could further push the general Afghan society into the arms of the Taliban and their radical worldview. As a result, worsening global security concerns could emanate from an isolated, disengaged Afghanistan.

However, human and international security are not the only concerns faced by Afghans under the Taliban. Since the regime's takeover, space for girls and women is also shrinking. Girls' high schools are still shut in most parts of the country, whereas women, who gained admissions and scholarships in foreign countries, are not allowed to leave Afghanistan without a male guardian.

3 | TALIBAN AND EDUCATION

More than four decades of war did not only kill hundreds of thousands of Afghans but also crippled and orphaned thousands. The war produced child soldiers and child labourers, exposing them to different types of violence—both episodic and constant. The physical and mental violence caused by the war affected the social attitudes of the youth, transforming them from victims of violence to perpetrators (as foot soldiers of various militant and terrorist groups). Additionally, the wars fuelled ethnic and religious conflicts and a mindset that encouraged the difference between 'us and them'. As a result, the educational system became a major instrument for the competing and warring factions to indoctrinate future generations according to their religious worldview, instead of promoting peace, social justice, equality, respect for opposing views, and acceptance of diversity. Soon after the US invasion, even donor countries and agencies tried their best to influence the educational system and undo some of the damage resulting from an ultraconservative curriculum taught in schools. As a result, weak central authority and the dependency of the educational system on

foreign aid further added to the politicisation and polarisation of the educational curriculum.

Decades of war in Afghanistan have also brought deep social and psychological turbulence into society, influencing a growing culture of extremist narratives and violence. This, in turn, has shaped each aspect of the Afghan society at the political, interpersonal, and community levels. Among others, the transformation of society into a violent one is notable in the country's educational system. Therefore, Afghanistan now stands with a culture of hate, prejudice, narrow-mindedness, and intolerance of different ethnic and religious groups in the country. Any attempt to break out of the 'conflict and extremism trap' in Afghanistan would necessarily have to engage with the challenges posed by ideas of violence ingrained among most of the country's youth through the educational curriculum. However, the events after August 2021 in Afghanistan mark another phase of using education as a tool to realise political ends. The foremost causality of regime changes in Afghanistan, as in the past, has been the education sector. This is attested to by the recent statement of the Minister of Education who declared Western science and education to be worthless and instead signalled that the new regime will give weight to religious education (India-Today, 2021). This will prove to be problematic as not only Afghans who have acquired Western education and skills will be out of the job market, but the future generations will have highly compromised learning outcomes. While the Taliban have denied Afghan girls the opportunity to learn, not only have they deprived a major section of the population of their right to education but also have robbed the classroom space of diversity and gender equity, which is essential to fostering critical thinking. The misplaced priority of the Taliban on girls and women is further illustrated by their decision of keeping girls above grade six out of school in many parts of the country on the pretext of not having the resources or infrastructure for learning in line with the Islamic principles.

During the US/coalition presence in Afghanistan, Afghan women got to experience relative freedom, equal rights, and access to education and work. This is especially true of women living in urban centres. The fact that women are now risking their lives to protest the Taliban shows how much they value the rights gained over the past two decades—and how much they fear losing them. This, therefore, requires interventions from the international community, which is negotiating with the de facto regime on various economic and humanitarian concerns. The international community, while negotiating with the regime, is required to make community-based interventions that seek to preserve gains made in the education sector in the past two decades. Moreover, such interventions should also be based on peace education and non-violence that can counter the Taliban's extreme

and radicalised narratives. In this regard, the works of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan (Pashtun nationalist leader, commonly known as Bacha Khan) on non-violence can be employed as an effective tool (Daud, 2019). Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan successfully wove non-violence into the social and political discourse of the Northwest Frontier Province in British India in his struggle against the British Raj. His role is significant in seeking the use of non-violence in a deeply segmented and patriarchal social setting of Pashtuns. Moreover, he was the first leader in the Muslim world who sought to use non-violence in the political arena by basing his ideas on the teachings of Islam. By focusing on such works and ideas and their incorporation into the school curriculum, the international community, while working on traditional and human security concerns, can also play an integral role in ensuring that schools in Afghanistan do not become nurseries of extremism and radicalised worldviews.

4 | THE WAY FORWARD

Afghanistan's current situation requires that the international community not abandon the country, especially because much of the global focus is now diverted to Ukraine. Afghanistan is going through one of the worst man-made economic and humanitarian crises, which require engagement with all relevant stakeholders to promote sustainable (positive) peace in the country. The following recommendations can, therefore, lead the way in formulating effective policy interventions in Afghanistan.

4.1 | Engaging in a localised process of (peace) dialogue

Both the Taliban and the international community need to engage in a dialogue process with clearly articulated conditions for resolving their disagreements on various issues, particularly security, human rights, and girls' education. A local (Afghan-led) 'Kabul process' must replace the 'Doha Process,' where expectations and conditionalities regarding resolving all pertinent issues, including inclusive democratic governance, women and human rights, the humanitarian and economic crises, and global security concerns about Afghanistan are addressed. All stakeholders need to set aside their extreme positions of disengaging and express clear objectives and plans for resolving Afghanistan-related, high-level policy issues in an inclusive engagement process. Some western stakeholders, particularly Norway and Switzerland, have both formally and informally invited various Afghan Taliban and civil society delegations for dialogue. However, the Norway model can prove to be more effective, where women and civil society are also given representation while negotiating with the de facto regime.

4.2 | Revisiting Western abandonment of Afghanistan

Abandoning Afghanistan at this critical moment not only defies human security aspirations laid out by the UN, but it can also be a reminder to the world that it was a mistake to abandon Afghanistan after the Soviet Union's withdrawal from the country in the 1980s. A multilateral engagement process and utilisation of soft power are needed to address and prevent security risks possibly emanating from Afghanistan that could once again challenge global security. Afghanistan's geostrategic location and political position close to global power brokers such as China also need to be considered in assessing the long-term implications of Western disengagement. An abandoned Afghanistan means more vacuum and space for radical and terrorist groups, which could further dent regional and global security. Similarly, international stakeholders should also lobby for the unfreezing of the Afghan reserves in the US, as the country is going through a major economic and humanitarian crisis. If the Biden administration has concerns over the use of these reserves by the regime, a third-party monitoring committee with representatives from major global stakeholders can be formed to oversee the use of these reserves in Afghanistan.

4.3 | Restoring (limited) Western diplomatic presence in Afghanistan

Major Western powers that were engaged in Afghanistan in the past 20 years have abandoned their military and diplomatic presence in the country despite having both the infrastructure and resources to operate in and from the country. As a result, these states are now disconnected from both Afghanistan and its people, who are living through difficult circumstances. Individuals within the Taliban regime may be under sanctions, but common Afghans, who are suffering, are not. Acknowledging this reality and following the UN modality of presence in Afghanistan, Western powers need to operationalise their light-footed diplomatic presence in Kabul to coordinate and engage on the ground with the de facto regime, as well as with the Afghan civil society to support local political dialogue and offer consular and visa services to Afghans who are in need and who are seeking higher education overseas.

4.4 | Promoting (peace) education and countering (extremist) narratives

The international community must work with the civil society in Afghanistan and in exile to focus on the education sector in the country, which is continuously suffering under the Taliban regime. In many parts of the country, even today, girls are deprived of their right to education,

whereas adult female students are barred from going overseas for higher education without a male guardian. Therefore, the international community should leverage its position to work towards the resumption of girls' education in the country, along with encouraging the regime to relax its restrictions on Afghan women leaving the country for higher education. Similarly, all concerned stakeholders should also develop open-source online learning modules for Afghan children deprived of quality education. These modules can be developed by taking input from the Afghan civil society, the de facto regime's moderate representatives, and international donor bodies. Peace education and non-violence should be the basis for such newly developed learning modules. Networking and lobbying with influential voices in the Muslim world are also important to emphasise the significance of access to education for women based on Islamic values. Bacha Khan's peaceful interpretation of Islamic texts can be used as a reference for such initiatives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Leading House South Asia and Iran (ZHAW) and swisspeace for supporting the roundtable discussion, which led to the development of this policy brief. We also thank Dr Nick Miszak for moderating the roundtable. Open access funding provided by Universitat Basel.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

ORCID

Farooq Yousaf  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1566-8161>

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Zulfiya Abawe is an Afghan scholar and legal expert, who recently completed her PhD in Law and Democracy from the Center for Constitutional Democracy, Maurer School of Law, Indiana University. She is currently working at the University of South Wales, UK.

Bilquees Daud holds a Master's degree from Germany and a BA degree from the American University of Afghanistan. She is Assistant Professor & Assistant Director for Afghanistan Studies at the Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University, India.

Haqmal Daudzai is a development expert currently working in Berlin, Germany, and holds a PhD in political science from the University of Erfurt, Germany. Dr Daudzai has previously worked as a political advisor to the Afghanistan National Parliament in Kabul.

Moheb Jabarkhail is currently based in the USA and works with the Center for International for Private Enterprise (CIPE), in Washington, DC. Moheb has worked extensively, in both the public and private sectors, on matters of Afghanistan's development, human security and governance.

Farooq Yousaf is currently based in Basel, Switzerland, working as a Senior Researcher at swisspeace. He completed his PhD in Politics from the University of Newcastle, Australia, and is the author of *Pakistan, Regional Security and Conflict Resolution: The Pashtun 'Tribal' Areas* (Routledge).

How to cite this article: Abawe, Z., Daud, B., Daudzai, H., Jabarkhail, M. & Yousaf, F. (2022) Afghanistan and the way forward: Incorporating indigenous knowledge into policymaking. *Global Policy*, 00, 1–7. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13144>