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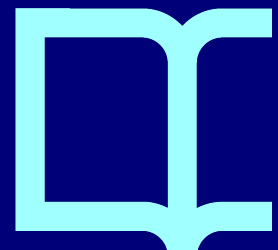
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Afghanistan: A Multidimensional Crisis

Afghanistan is on the verge of a humanitarian catastrophe in parallel with the country's potential economic collapse. The state of affairs is further compounded by worsening environmental conditions derived from the ongoing effects of climate change. The country's current situation is quite dramatic, aggravated by the international community's response that mainly focuses on enabling emergency evacuations of uniquely vulnerable Afghans and international citizens and their dependents. Meanwhile, the humanitarian needs of the rest of the population are severely neglected. Undoubtedly, unfolding events require attention, with the need to offer some reflections and critical insights on the socio-economic and political hazards that arise when framing the magnitude of the refugee crisis and the effects of climate change as a catalyzing factor on the existing conflict divisions. There is a need for theoretical and practical risk assessments that integrate climate change as a decisive force in developing future conflict and peace scenarios. In this regard, conflict and peace scenario analysis emerges as a vital tool, as it can help project the potential impact on the human population and identify implications regarding future displacements and associated social and economic costs. Within the outlined context, this piece intends to contribute to the growing –rather imperative- need to explore the link between conflicts, peace, and climate change when assessing the case of Afghanistan and the takeover of the Taliban regime in August 2021.

The hardships associated with climate change and their role and impact on intensifying situations of political conflict are not a new theme. A comprehensive study developed for the Stockholm Environment Institute (Savage et al. 2009) looking at the case of Afghanistan led to research outcomes warning on the explosive cocktail affecting the country. The mixture of conflict, extreme climate conditions, and complicated

topography can increase the country's challenges to recover from ongoing and emerging conflicts and their associated dynamics. Climate change materializes as a critical problem for the survival of humankind due to its societal, economic, and political connotations, with a significant body of literature flourishing in many directions. Initially, researchers focused their attention on examining the relationship between the exploitation of natural resources, either as a funding source for armed groups or as a pushing factor for new emerging war axes. The relationship between natural resources and armed groups has evolved into what is known as the 'greed and grievance hypotheses,' having as one of its leading authorities the studies presented by Collier and Hoeffler (2002, 2004). As the effects of climate change advanced, so did the literature examining climate change and its association with conflict and peace studies, in line with the work developed by Salehyan (2008) or Nordås and Gleditsch (2015).

Therefore, the importance of case studies as a source of knowledge on climate change, security, and conflict is becoming very relevant to aid nations' policymaking. Accordingly, the discussions and analysis presented depart from the geopolitics of the armed conflict, considering them as relevant and critical, but acknowledging as well the importance of geo-economic and socio-political consequences of climate change. The interrelated objective of this critical analysis is to offer insight into the role that climate change will play in the Afghan conflict with special attention given to the humanitarian dimension as well as its conflict and security nexus. While the link between climate change and conflict has been widely accepted, its concrete effects on conflict dynamics and the prospective security nexus are non-yet conclusive. It is widely understood that climate change has evolved from an environmental and developmental issue to a central security policy element with foreign policy consequences (Peters et al. 2020). Portraying climate change as a security problem offers new insights, contributing to the attraction of

public attention. However, the excessive securitization of climate change often leads to considering the problem under the traditional security policy framework (Brzoska 2009, 137). Such an approach has a significant impact when assessing the case of Afghanistan and its possible future outcomes. The assessment should factor in the country's current socio-economic fragility to help identify climate-change-induced consequences.

Geopolitics of Conflict

Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the country's recent history has been linked to conflict and war. The URSS intervention drew the political history and redefined the geopolitical relevance of Afghanistan in the region, being disputed by Pakistan and Iran for decades (Rajmil, Morales, and Andreosso-O'Callaghan 2021). A second crucial political move relates to the United States' involvement in its counterbalancing power efforts by supporting local tribes that would later result in the empowerment of the *Mujahedeen* and what later would become the Taliban regime. The international engagement in the country through intermediate episodes that combined both diplomatic and military operations resulted in a vacuum of power that helped the Taliban gain control from 1996 to 2001. The year 2001 can be considered a breakpoint on the international relations landscape. An international event with global consequences - the September 11 terrorist attacks- has had lasting effects within the country, the region, and worldwide. With the so-called "War on Terror" led by the United States, the first Taliban regime ended, and a new attempt to bring a pro-West regime intended to emerge in a fragile post-war scenario in 2004. In this sense, no one would have imagined that two decades later, in August 2021, the United States would be the catalyst factor that would trigger the Taliban taking over the power and ending any hopes of 'pseudo'-democratic regime in the country.

Same actors but different regimes? It is still too early to know the extension of the misuse of power that the Taliban will perpetrate and the flagrant human rights abuse that will occur. Still, unfolding events are not offering an optimistic picture of what is to come. Nevertheless, in an astonishing diplomatic and political communication strategy, the Taliban planned and designed the political discourse they wished to project, at least at international stances. Reports of the Taliban using tactics of violence to pressure Pakistani media to get the desired coverage soon appeared, combined with stories of the Taliban trying to develop close ties and amicable relationships with media reporters as presented in global media channels (Arif, Golan, and Moritz 2014). In 2021, with the world's eyes focused on Kabul, the Taliban proved a good understanding of media news routines and news culture that they are integrating as part of the communication strategy in alignment with their interests. In this regard, different Taliban officials and spokesmen became more accessible than ever to journalists; women interviewed them on the media, and when they took over Kabul, the Taliban tried to present a new, more tolerant image to the world. Since the Taliban takeover, their efforts concentrated on developing a very professional Public Relations and Media campaign with an internal political goal: to demoralize people in areas they had not yet conquered. Afghanistan's Al-Emarah Studio produced pro-Taliban multimedia content with TV crews all around Kabul (Mackenzie 2021). The regime carefully drafted their political communication campaign focused on elaborating reassuring messages about life returning to normal, as the regime was struggling to calm the international community and widespread panic in Afghanistan. The Taliban knew that they would be in the middle of the world media agenda for weeks, and they took advantage of it to frame a new regime that had become much more pragmatic.

Undoubtedly, this new branding strategy of the Taliban regime will be one of the main topics and dilemmas in the years to come.

In the middle of both a national and international shock due to the Taliban taking over the whole country, new possible policy orientations regarding social issues and the challenges associated with the impact of climate change have surfaced. The consequences and the effects of climate change are significant sources of concern. The convergence of climate risk and conflict further exacerbates food and economic insecurity and health gaps, limiting access to essential services and weakening the government's capacity to provide adequate support to its institutions and population (Su and Gagne 2019, 10). In addition, the country's drought conditions have worsened, threatening agricultural production with alarming consequences for food security, rising concerns regarding hunger, and malnutrition effects for the population. The impact of climate change on the security perspectives resulting in population displacements will have social implications for the country's future and its development.

Geo-economics, Climate, and Migration

The United Nations and the Red Cross have issued a severe warning indicating that Afghanistan faces dire circumstances that are overcomplicated by a potential economic and humanitarian collapse. Oxfam (2021, 4) has named the country as one of the "world's worst hunger hot spots." Furthermore, the United High Commissioner for Refugees – Filippo Grandi –, has indicated that the failure of public services and the potential collapse of the Afghan economy will lead to significant displacements within and outside the country, deepening the ongoing refugee crisis (UNHCR Ireland 2021). Currently, displacement trends are mainly internal; however, there are serious concerns about the need for action before the winter arrives to prevent the unfolding of a humanitarian

catastrophe. The incumbent Taliban Minister for Refugees - Khalil-ur-Ragnab Gaqqabu, a listed terrorist by the United States and subject to UN sanctions - has raised significant concerns regarding the seriousness of the situation and the need for immediate international aid and support (UNHCR Ireland 2021). Unquestionably, Afghanistan is facing critical challenges, including i) high poverty and corruption levels; ii) the impact of the Global Health Crisis, iii) the significant underdevelopment of the country's social and services systems; iv) the intensification of the effects of climate change – that has impacted the region by aggravating the effects of droughts; v) the ongoing conflict - that resulted in significant shortfalls in aid funds from international agencies that have worsened as a result of unfolding events that led to the Taliban taking over the country on August 15, 2021.

In July 2021, nearly 18.5 million people representing almost half of all Afghan's population, needed humanitarian support, with a third of the country suffering from malnutrition and severe poverty (Loft 2021, 3). Figure 1 below shows how the government is rated at very high risk for anti-corruption practices. The country is within the higher poverty band, as reflected by both categories' 5.0 score, reaching the highest possible value within the range bands that fluctuate between 1.0 and 5.0.

The nation's humanitarian debacle has been enhanced by the draw-down of coalition forces and, particularly, by the United States "messy" pull-out after 20 years of intervention, as widely reported by world media sources like the BBC (2021), The New York Times (2021), and The Washington Post (Knox 2021). The international community has not recognized the Taliban regime. The global response to the new government has significant economic and financial consequences for Afghans, with a special damaging

effect on women and children that account for increasing numbers of internally displaced people. According to a United Nations report (UNHCR 2021), more than 3.5 million persons have already been internally displaced by mid-July 2021.

Global international organizations are warning of the dramatic situation faced by Afghanistan. Times of India (2021) reported in September 2021 that the United Nations pledged more than USD 1 billion in aid for Afghanistan, warning that the majority of the population could soon nosedive below the poverty line. The deputy minister of the last Afghan government, Mr. Muhammad Suleiman Bin Shah, said that the country had a fragile economy before the takeover (Times of India 2021). More specifically, Bin Shah said: "Although there was a lot of foreign money thrown at it, very little time or attention was given to the economy and economic development in the last 20 years." Indeed, the international response to the Afghan crisis has failed to consider its economic dimension. The country's miseries and its refugee crisis have been further exacerbated by the international community's denial of foreign reserves and/or international aid to Afghanistan (GeoTV 2021). In September 2021, the UN Development Program issued another dramatic warning indicating that the poverty rate in the country may rise to 97% by mid-2022. The projections are daunting as according to the Asian Development Bank (ADB) report (2021), in 2020, approximately 47.3% of the population lived below the national poverty line. In addition, 34.3% of the employed population's daily earnings were below \$1.90 in 2019 and 29.9% prevalence of undernourishment between 2017 and 2019. Moreover, Afghanistan's official national multidimensional poverty Index (National Statistics and Information Authority 2019) shows that 51.7% of the country's population can be considered to be multidimensionally poor (i.e: a person is considered multidimensionally poor when it suffers from many disadvantages at the same time. For

example, poor health, lack of essential resources like clean water, electricity, cooking fuels, lack of education, poor working conditions, hunger, and malnutrition). The ADB report offers a striking yet in-depth portrait of acute poverty and deprivation levels affecting the country. Research findings point to children as the most affected, indicating that 58% of all people in multidimensional poverty are children under 18. The report is based on data for 2016-17 suggesting that fully 56.4% of the country's children are poor compared with just under half of adults, stressing the magnitude of the crisis as international resources are now effectively withdrawn, and national resources have been frozen showing the severity of conditions faced by the Afghan population (Asian Development Bank 2021). Figure 2 below offers insights on core macroeconomic indicators that reflect the country's delicate and fragile situation, with negative GDP per capita growth amidst high levels of corruption and excruciating poverty levels.

Before the Taliban's takeover, the country's economic system was already weak. Yet, it has plummeted as international assistance was immediately frozen as the United States, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank froze loans as part of their immediate response to the Taliban's taking control of the country. The British Red Cross (2021) has indicated that Afghanistan is in need of direct humanitarian help as a result of decades of conflict, the effects of climate change, and the latest events triggered by the United States debacle, and the lack of appropriate planning on its exit from the country. The result is quite daunting as the country's fortunes have been left in the hands of extremists after 20 years of intervention. Unquestionably, Afghanistan emerges as a nation facing critical challenges within its national and international context with severe implications for its population.

Further Thoughts

The number of Afghan refugees has increased dramatically, and by September 2021, there were more than 2 million Afghan refugees in neighboring countries and another 3.5 million internally displaced. Hence, approximately 5.5 million Afghans were either internally or internationally displaced. By the mere fact of being displaced, these 5.5 million Afghans are currently in a situation that endangers their human rights – particularly their right to life, health, food, education, security, and an adequate standard of living, as well as their cultural rights. Undeniably, Afghan's human rights are in jeopardy and exacerbated by climate change dynamics that contribute to worsening their situation.

The Afghan population is highly reliant on ecosystems for their livelihoods – farming and agriculture are critical, as highlighted by Eastin (2018, 290) and Omerkhil et al. (2020). However, the resilience of rural communities has been challenged to a breaking point due to the enduring internal conflict compounded by the impact of climate change. In this regard, rural communities have struggled to produce food due to conflict-derived insecurity, intensifying droughts, and floods derived from the deforestation caused by continuous periods of drought. Population displacement is a situation that is contributing to endanger human rights further. The mere displacement of populations entails greater food insecurity due to a loss of access to harvesting and farming lands, decreasing their access to clean water, and deteriorating sanitation conditions. Moreover, there is also a higher level of sexual violence derived from the need of displaced persons to walk long distances or queue for water or firewood collection, chores typically placed on women and young girls. In this process, they become targets for assault by local residents, officials, police, or other refugees. Additionally, when girls need to spend hours

collecting water or wood, they are further deprived of their already compromised right to education.

But who bears responsibility for these human rights violations? It is necessary to recall two relevant points: first, once the Taliban regime is in power, Afghanistan remains bound by its international commitments and obligations derived from the international environmental and human rights law. Second, human rights are impacted by the dramatic impact of climate change conditions. In this sense, it is worth noting that between 1995 and 2017, Afghanistan ratified most of the leading environmental universal treaties, including inter alia the Paris Agreement, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. Similarly, human rights outlined in this study are binding for Afghanistan both as customary international law and as obligations contained in Human rights treaties that Afghanistan has ratified. Some of the most important accords, treaties, or conventions include the ICCPR, the ICESCR, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Regarding the obligations derived from environmental treaties, Afghanistan developed a domestic environmental legal framework to respond to environmental challenges and international commitments between the years that spanned the two Taliban regimes. The need for such responses is paramount and urgent as the country's environmental conditions are deteriorating at a significant pace. In 2010 the country experienced warming temperatures that more than doubled the global average. A World Bank report predicts a future increase in temperature that could range between 1.4° C and

4.0° C by 2060, and between 2.0° C and 6.2° C by 2090 (World Bank Group 2021). Given the grim projections offered by climate change, the international community can only hope that the new Taliban regime will continue to work on climate change mitigation and prevention following the previous government policies.

To conclude, the international community is in a position to require Afghanistan – regardless of whoever holds control of the government – to comply with their human rights obligations and even adopt countermeasures to force compliance with them. The climate change dimension needs to be addressed to offer primary conditions that guarantee human security and survival. The consequences for Afghans seem to be challenging in the face of climate change forecasts. The 2021 United Nations Climate Conference (COP26) in Glasgow represented one of the latest opportunities to address the climate change effects. In this sense, when projecting humanitarian aid plans in Afghanistan, there is an imperative need to include climate change as a decisive factor. If eluded, the devastating human consequences of the conflict will be mild compared to what might unfold in an already worrying context.

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Figure 1: Population, Poverty, and Corruption Indicators (Refinitiv Datastream, authors 2021).

Figure 2: Macroeconomic Indicators (Refinitiv Datastream, authors 2021).

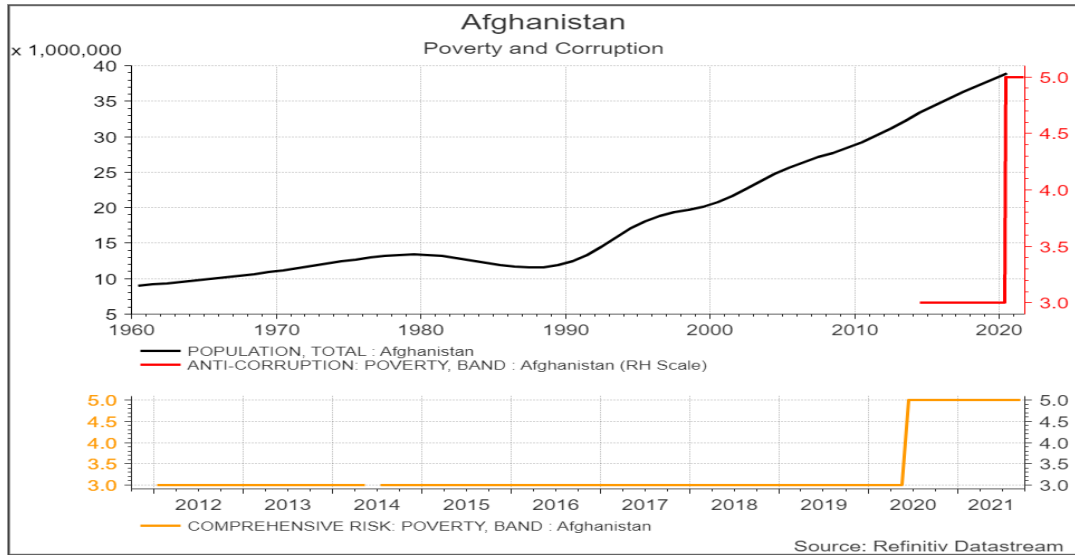


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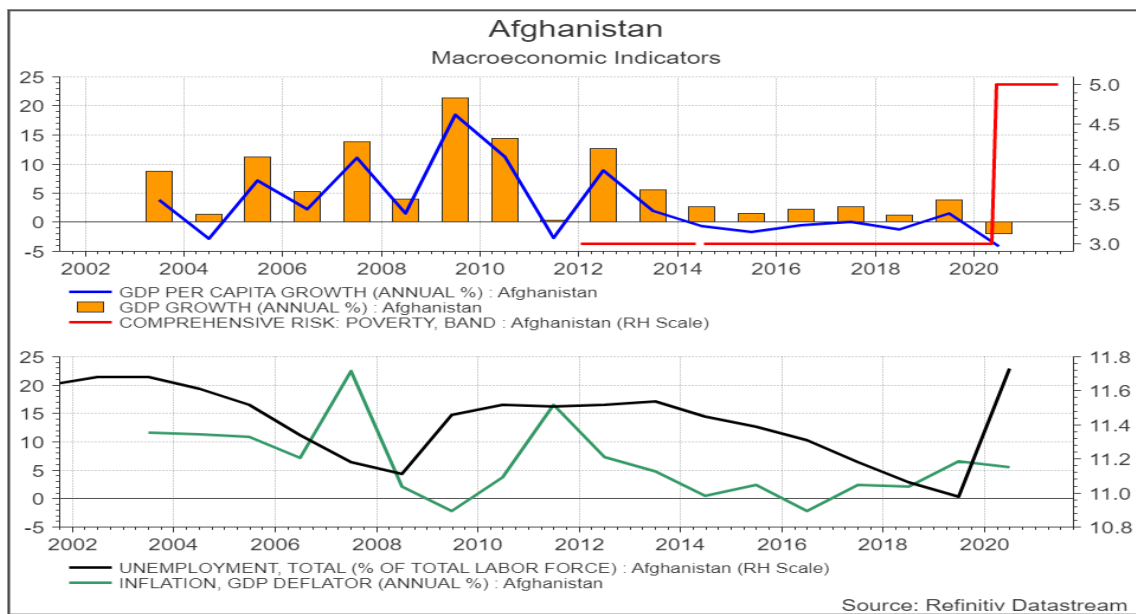


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