

Engaging with the Taliban: From Leverage and Isolation to Piecemeal Pragmatism

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Since the Taliban military victory of August 15, 2021, the dominant mode of engagement with Afghanistan's de facto authorities, led by the United States and other 'like-minded countries' (among which is The Netherlands) has been a policy of pressure and isolation. Three years in, these countries have little to show for it. It is time for them to adopt a more pragmatic approach.

Flawed assumption(s) and (lack of) leverage

Victorious rebels value political survival above all else. In the aftermath of the 2021 takeover, most experts and diplomats therefore assumed that the Taliban, confronted with an unprecedented economic, financial, and humanitarian crisis, were in a [position of weakness](#) vis-à-vis the international community. Following this logic, the regime's urgent need for cash and its long-term quest for international recognition would provide the international community with enough [leverage](#) to push for a [more moderate](#), inclusive, and collaborative regime.¹

This mode of engagement has not achieved anything. Since they have been in power, the Taliban have systematically refused to make compromises; they have continued to adopt hardline policies (most notably on [women's rights](#)); and their rule has remained as exclusive as ever. Meanwhile, the regime has developed new streams of [revenue](#) and maintained a low-capacity state.

This approach has failed because it is anchored in flawed assumptions about the Taliban's needs and priorities. Now that they control the country, the Taliban have to make decisions they never had to make before. They must distribute newly-acquired resources, positions, and benefits, while developing policy in a wide array of sectors. These decisions affect a large and diverse share of constituents, inevitably creating frustrations, tensions, and [dissensions](#) among sympathizers, followers, and members. That is why the Taliban value [internal cohesion](#), unity, and [obedience](#) above all else, including even financial resources and international recognition.

For the Taliban leadership, ideologically-consistent policymaking (particularly evident in their policies on women's rights) signals their ideological dedication to domestic audiences (population, rank-and-file, commanders, hardliners, etc.). It lessens the risk of defection to other Islamist jihadist groups and allows them to maintain internal cohesion around ideologically motivated individuals. This is particularly relevant for the discontent Taliban members who have grown [nostalgic](#) of the Jihad days or disappointed in a regime that they might see as too moderate. It incentivizes the Taliban leadership, around Supreme Leader Haibatullah Arkhunzada and the Rahbari Shura, to cater to their most

¹ This logic has been notably visible in the [freezing of Afghanistan's financial assets](#), the sanction regime against the Taliban, or the European Union's adoption of the [five-benchmark approach](#). For an early critique of this, see Swedlund, Haley, Romain Malejacq, and Malte Lierl. "[Foreign Aid to Afghanistan Won't Moderate the Taliban](#)." *Foreign Policy*, October 27, 2021.

ideologically-inclined members and avoid making concessions that could be perceived as yielding to the West.²

The pressure and leverage approach also ignores the role of emotions as drivers of politics. The Taliban value international recognition. However, they do not perceive it as a benefit to be gained through negotiations. Rather, the Taliban believe that, as military victors, they have the right to rule the country without foreign interference. They see themselves as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan and want to be [treated as such](#), with the respect and deference due to their status.³ The Taliban therefore consider their treatment by the international community as fundamentally unjust but also as generally unfair in view of existing international practices.

Towards pragmatic, piecemeal engagement

The original consensus to pressure and isolate the Taliban regime has now largely [eroded](#). Roughly [three groups of countries](#) with different views on how to engage with the de facto authorities have started to emerge: [one regional group](#) (including China, Russia, and Iran) is already normalizing diplomatic relationships with the Taliban; one isolationist group (including France and Germany) maintains a hard line on the Taliban's responsibility to comply to international standards and obligations (in particular regarding human rights and women's rights); and one pragmatic group (including the United States and the United Kingdom) advocates gradual engagement without compromising on core values.

There is a very strong moral argument to be made for not engaging with regimes that do not respect democratic principles and human rights. While this can be seen as a form of symbolic support towards the Afghan population (most importantly women), so far it has not had any tangible effects on the ground. This does not mean that the international community should officially [recognize](#) the Taliban regime.

Yet, remaining firm on core human rights and women rights' principles should not preclude other forms of engagement. Maintaining dialogue with the Taliban is needed for more efficient humanitarian efforts, fruitful counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics cooperation, and economic development. It is also necessary for socializing the Taliban into the workings of the international community, monitoring the situation in the country, and for developing true relationships and shared understandings. Ostracizing the Taliban, on the contrary, would involve significant costs for the Afghan population and represent a major international security threat.

The Netherlands, along with the other 'like-minded countries', should therefore favor a [piecemeal approach](#) to negotiations that does not focus exclusively on highly contentious, political issues, but rather engages in more pragmatic, long-term, unbundled discussions of a wide variety of issues, including more technical, less political ones. International engagement with the Taliban will not fundamentally change the nature of the regime. However, it can alleviate the situation of the Afghan population by providing support in a number of urgent sectors.⁴

² This argument is further developed in Malejacq, Romain, and Niels Terpstra. "[Why International Leverage Has Failed With the Taliban](#)." *Lawfare*, July 30, 2023. An example of this logic can be found in the Supreme Leader's last-minute decision to maintain [girls' schools](#) closed.

³ The Taliban's decision not to participate in the [recent Doha talks](#) in the presence of other Afghan representatives is indicative of this.

⁴ In his [report](#), Special Coordinator Feridun Sinirlioğlu, [mandated by the United Nations Security Council](#) to provide "forward-looking recommendations for an integrated and coherent approach" towards the Taliban, for instance emphasized the need to improve the capacities of Afghan institutions, support agriculture livelihoods, finish infrastructure projects, improve airport security, strengthen border control, or cooperate on water management.