



Speech of Mr. John F. Sopko at the twelfth round of the Herat Security Dialogue

Afghanistan And The New Reality

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It is a pleasure to be here today at the 12th Herat Security Dialogue.

I want to thank Dr. Davood Moradian, Director General of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS), for inviting me, as well as the Spanish government and the International Observatory on Terrorism Studies for hosting this important event. Thank you also to Sami Mahdi, of Amu TV, for serving as today's moderator.

A few months ago, I was originally asked to speak about how my office, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, (SIGAR) planned to deal with the current situation in Afghanistan.

A lot has happened since then. First, SIGAR is now slated to close within a year and secondly, on January 24th, President Trump removed me along with 17 other Inspectors General from our positions. That said, I am hard pressed to complain since I have long publicly advocated for the right of any new President to replace his Inspector Generals – but who would have thought someone would listen to me – well, so much for the law of unintended consequences. But my loss is your gain since no longer in the government I can now be brutally frank in today's speech - my first since my retirement.

First, let's start by being totally honest about how Afghanistan got to where it is today. After 20 years, the United States and the international community miserably failed to create a viable, effective government in Afghanistan. Its sudden collapse on Aug. 15, 2021, is particularly relevant now since it laid bare a gaping disconnect between reality and what senior U.S., coalition, and Afghan officials had been saying for decades: that success was just around the corner.

Success was always elusive, with the seeds of failure sown long before the final withdrawal. The catastrophic outcome in Afghanistan highlights the need to recognize the limits of external intervention in a country like Afghanistan and the dangers of overly ambitious missions and overly optimistic assessments of success.

Secondly, we must recognize that shortly after the U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban quickly returned to power. This fact is also relevant to today's discussion. There were no final epic battles. The people did not rise in unified opposition against the Taliban. Rather, the last



vestiges of the old republic softly dissolved with the barefooted President Ghani unceremoniously fleeing and the Taliban's triumphant return mostly uncontested.

Thirdly, since the collapse, the international community has sought to continue to support the people of Afghanistan. The U.S. alone has appropriated or otherwise made available more than \$21 billion in assistance to Afghanistan and Afghan refugees. This includes \$3.7 billion in humanitarian and development assistance and an additional \$4 billion in a Swiss-based Fund for the Afghan People or "Afghan Fund".

While this assistance may have staved off famine in the face of economic collapse, this assistance has failed to dissuade the Taliban from holding Americans hostage, dismantling the rights of women and girls, censoring the media, persecuting former soldiers, judges, reporters and civil society leaders and allowing the country to—once again—become a terrorist haven.

In my opinion, what is worse is that the Taliban have cynically benefited from our desire to help by diverting aid, imposing taxes, fees, and duties on it, and creating barriers that prevent all the people of Afghanistan from accessing essential services. Moreover, our assistance has allowed the regime to prioritize funding their security and intelligence services to strengthen their stranglehold on power.

The fourth point I would like to make is that all of this is happening during a shift in the political landscape. Many voters in the United States and other donor nations have voiced frustration with continuing to fund efforts abroad while their own needs are unmet. Many are tired with the 20 years of self-delusion that promised victory and a new birth of democracy in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Some believe that money spent in places like Afghanistan is more about funding a system that benefits a handful of international organizations, NGOs, and contractors rather than people in crisis.

Just as President Eisenhower in his 1961 farewell address warned of the influence of the military industrial complex, today there is a growing aid and development industrial complex. Many voters in my country believe that this complex should not be the primary beneficiary of aid dollars. I personally believe that it was—and still is—the case.

Under my former leadership, SIGAR has found significant evidence that U.S. and international donor funds have not been well used. It is bad enough when governments spend tax dollars on efforts many of their citizens do not support. I believe it is worse when those tax dollars are not even achieving their stated goals.



In the United States today, humanitarian and development funding are being scrutinized. Afghanistan is no longer a top U.S. foreign policy priority. That means that it will be competing with a much larger pool of potential aid recipient countries.

So, the fifth point I would like to make today is for future funding to be considered, — regardless of where it is targeted— it will have to meet a few key criteria:

- It must be clearly and directly linked to U.S. national security interests.
- It must be likely to achieve outcomes that reflect those interests. and
- It must be subject to continuous and vigorous oversight at every stage of funding and implementation.

Reflecting voters' concerns, President Donald Trump, on the day he took office, implemented a 90-day pause in U.S. foreign development assistance. That pause is ongoing and will include an evaluation of all foreign assistance using—to some degree I hope—the criteria I just mentioned.

As an aside, I very much enjoyed Dr. Moradian's article in *The Diplomat* called, "The UN's Capitulation to the Taliban: For decades, the United Nations has failed Afghanistan." I couldn't agree more. As he notes, UN efforts in Afghanistan are "characterized by failure, secrecy, waste, corruption and complicity in the Taliban's despotic reign. He's right. And this cannot continue.

Later this year, I hope SIGAR will be issuing its last lessons learned report, which will take a hard look at UN and US assistance in countries like Afghanistan - at least that is what I had planned before my departure. Before I left SIGAR, my staff reported they were finding that the Taliban interfere in aid delivery at every stage in the process. The regime directs aid to its supporters and away from its enemies, extracts kickbacks from UN contractors, and infiltrates aid organizations, forcing them to censor reporting about diversion.

This problem is not unique to Afghanistan: we were told donors face these same challenges under similar regimes across the globe. Hostile governments and warzones alike severely limit access and thus, oversight. It is hard enough to combat diversion even when our diplomats, development experts, and auditors are in country. Overseeing funding and efforts over the horizon is a nearly impossible task, even with third-party monitors.

I had intended that report to highlight best practices from around the world. At the time of my departure my staff could find few truly best practices used by any government or international organization – a strikingly dismal perspective on international assistance that may partially



explain the Trump administration's recent decision to revamp USAID and pause and assess foreign aid funding.

As many of you know, the United States relies heavily on the UN and other international organizations by outsourcing to their various agencies a large portion of our aid money. In Afghanistan, nearly 65% of our funding went through UN agencies and the World Bank. Part of the reason is that the main U.S. aid agency, USAID, did not have sufficient staff or capacity to oversee its growing aid budget. We hope this will improve if USAID's functions are ultimately more closely aligned with the State Department.

But what does this all mean for the future of Afghanistan assistance?

Well, as a start, it means that if we wish to continue the important work of improving the lives of Afghans, we must face a new reality. There is a new sheriff in town who proclaims a mandate to do more with less.

At the same time, we must accept the fact that the Taliban is in power; Afghanistan is no longer a U.S. national interest priority; and future assistance is going to be heavily scrutinized to ensure that it has both a direct link to U.S. national interests and is producing results rather than simply propping up and paying the salaries of international donor and NGO personnel.

In closing, let me leave you with four specific thoughts for the future of Afghanistan:

First: We must carefully assess whether the harm (rewarding the Taliban) outweighs any potential benefits of assistance.

Second: We should not assume short-term humanitarian aid is always the answer, even if it is labeled as "lifesaving" - a designation too freely used by the UN and other international development organizations. Since the Taliban's return, almost three-quarters of U.S. assistance has been humanitarian. But the same humanitarian aid that feeds hungry people also supports a regime's military and secret police. It can also lead to long-term dependencies if it is allowed to continue for too long.

Third: We need to reduce the number of "middlemen" between the donor and the intended aid recipients. Aid passes through long chains of UN agencies and international NGOs—with each taking a cut—before reaching needy Afghans. A good percentage of the money disappears before it reaches them. While legal, this is also diversion.

These middlemen—often confined to compounds in Kabul or headquarter offices in Washington, Rome, London and elsewhere—contribute little. However, their "cut" pays their



salaries, living expenses and overhead costs—and ensures the financial survival of their organizations.

Fourth: We must do better than constantly voicing just our righteous indignation in reaction to Taliban atrocities and violations of human rights. We must act forcefully and truly condition our assistance.

For example, since nothing else seems to have changed the Taliban’s policies, we could start the process of returning to the United States the nearly \$4 billion dollars sitting in the Afghan Fund in Switzerland to ensure that not a penny benefits the Taliban if they violate humanitarian norms and support terrorists. And, at a minimum, we can impose stricter enforcement of Taliban travel restrictions.

But it can’t just be the United States. The international community must act with one voice and one purpose in Afghanistan.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, all donors need to have the courage to say “NO” to the Taliban and their despicable actions by conditioning and withholding assistance if necessary.

Thank You for your attention.