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Foreign aid in Afghanistan as an international security and foreign policy tool

I. Introduction

With the end of the Cold War, conventional wars between major states almost disappeared, but civil wars and conflicts between small states increased. The most accepted approach to explaining this situation was the security-development nexus, which gained popularity in the 1990s. The most formal expression of this nexus is an article written by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali for Foreign Affairs in 1992. This article states that promoting social and economic development is the most important function of the UN to achieve peace and stability globally.¹ In the "An Agenda for Peace" report published in the same year, the Secretary-General states that social, political and economic development is a serious necessity for the prevention of violence and the establishment of an environment of peace and stability.² In this sense, ensuring social, economic and political development through foreign aid to countries with instability and security risks has been considered a valid solution.

The concept of foreign aid is defined as the transfer of capital, materials and services from a foreign country or an international organisation for the benefit of a country or its population. Although the objectives of this aid from the UN point of view are of a humanitarian nature, they inevitably have a political agenda. In this sense, foreign aid can be used as a means of a country's military and political objectives. Hans Morgenthau, for example, cites six variants of foreign aid as "humanitarian foreign aid, subsistence foreign

aid, military foreign aid, bribery, prestige foreign aid, and foreign aid for economic development" and suggests that it inevitably involves a political context.³ Especially during the Cold War, financial and technical assistance was used by both the United States and the USSR for political purposes.⁴

Historically, a form of foreign aid has been provided for the development of countries with a certain capacity in social, economic and political issues, while the other form has been used for the purpose of carrying out state- or nation-building processes from scratch. Beyond the need for a large amount of cash, state-building processes also require serious responsibilities in the dimension of guidance and technical support. The most important and well-known example of such foreign aid is the Marshall Plan provided by the US for the reconstruction of post-World War II Europe. In addition to creating an important market for US industry, the plan also aimed to prevent the expansionist policies of the Soviets.

The idea of social, political, and economic reconstruction of European countries within the framework of democratic values in the Marshall Plan largely reflects the "Liberal Peace Theory" approach. Relying on the acceptance that countries based on economic and political liberal and democratic values have a more peaceful and stable structure, this approach was also considered a solution for failed states seen as security threats to both the US and the West after 2001.⁵ A similar pattern was followed in Afghanistan, which was occupied after the 9/11 terrorist

¹ Boutros-Ghali, *Empowering the United Nations*, 1992, 95-96.

² Boutros-Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace*, 1992, 16.

³ Morgenthau, *A Political Theory of Foreign Aid*, 1962, 301.

⁴ Boutros-Ghali, *Empowering the United Nations*, 1992, 97.

⁵ Chesterman, *You, The People: The United Nations, Transitional Administration, and State-Building*, 2005, 25-36.

attacks. This liberal state-building project, carried out between 2001 and 2021 with the aim of overthrowing the Taliban regime for supporting the al-Qaeda terrorist organisation, can be considered a comprehensive effort that includes economic, social, political and security areas. However, these produced limited positive results and did not generate peace and stability in the country. The political objective at the heart of the efforts, the complete elimination of the effectiveness of the Taliban regime in the country and its reconstruction as a democratic state, also failed. Finally, on 15 August 2021, the Taliban seized the country and established a de facto state administration. Despite the astonishing military success of the Taliban, they are now confronted with the real difficulty in the country: economic and political government. Under Taliban rule, the country also needs foreign aid, and the people living in the country face vital challenges.

Historically, Afghanistan's dependence on foreign aid and technical support dates back to before the 2001 invasion and has become the country's general characteristic. This situation also appears to remain a very serious problem politically and economically during the Taliban era. Security and political concerns about the Taliban leadership by donor countries and international organisations are causing significant reservations about the aid. Moreover, the blockades placed on Afghanistan's international reserve funds also leave the Taliban leadership in a difficult position. In this sense, the use of foreign aid as a means of control over the Taliban regime to address the political and security concerns of Western states also creates a complex dilemma. However, the aid provided by countries without this dilemma, such as China and Pakistan, is another dimension of the chaos in the country.

This article discusses the effects of foreign aid and state-building policies in Afghanistan

since 2001, and the challenges of maintaining foreign aid to the country during the Taliban rule. On this aim, it briefly references the historical background of foreign aid and state-building processes in Afghanistan. Then, it examines foreign aid and state-building activities carried out between 2001 and 2021, analysing the successes and failures of these activities. Finally, it discusses what foreign aid means for the Taliban, which has taken over the country, and the reservations about this aid.

II. Foreign aid in Afghanistan as a rentier state from a historical perspective

Economic instability is one of the main reasons for the political conflicts and power struggles in Afghanistan. The country's administrative problems and struggles for interests also pose serious obstacles to the elimination of economic instability. Prior to 1978, the country was self-sufficient in terms of food and had significant underground resources, but the investments of foreign countries have nevertheless constituted most of the country's income since the 18th century. The country's economy has traditionally been based on agriculture, although only 12% of the land can be farmed. In this sense, the fact that it is not based on any domestic production has led to the Afghan economy being defined as a rentier state.⁶

Afghanistan was first established as a state in 1747 with the coronation of Ahmed Shah Durani. However, the country's creation of a state system in the modern sense owes to Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, who ascended to the throne in 1880, taking the legitimate monopoly of the use of force, establishing a central government, and making the tax collection system work.⁷ Abdur Rahman was known as the Iron *Amir* because of his violent policies. During this period, although the country had a modern state system, it struggled with its foreign affairs, stuck

⁶ Suhrke, *When More is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan*, 2011.

⁷ Shahrani, *Taliban and Talibanism in Historical Perspective*, 2008, 162.

between Russia and Britain. The Durand Line, which is still a major problem between Pakistan and Afghanistan, was created by the treaty signed with British India in 1893. The Amir managed to attract significant military and economic support thanks to the good relations he developed with the British.⁸ However, in the face of this support, the country's foreign relations became dependent on the British.

The relationship with Britain also continued under Amir Habibullah. However, full independence was declared in 1919 after the British were defeated as a result of the Third Anglo-Afghan War under Amanullah. After this war, Amanullah tried to establish economic and political relations with countries such as the Soviet Union, Turkey, Egypt, France, Germany, and Iran.⁹ The country's position as a buffer between the British and the Soviet Union contributed significantly to finding economic and political support. The same situation continued in a different way with the political climate created by the Cold War after the British left the region in 1948.¹⁰ This time, in line with the ideological approaches of the Cold War, Afghanistan was supported by various Western countries against the Soviet threat. Afghan governments benefited from this situation by receiving foreign aid from both sides. For example, in 1955-56, about USD 125m in economic and military aid was provided by the Soviets.¹¹

Afghanistan also became a member of the World Bank in 1955. From this date until the Soviet invasion, the World Bank carried out major relief activities in Afghanistan. After

1979, World Bank aid continued to Afghanistan through its Pakistani office. The main investment areas were education, transportation, and agriculture. Direct World Bank activities in the country resumed in May 2002.¹² Another source which has had a significant impact in meeting Afghanistan's foreign aid needs is the Asian Development Bank. As a founding member of the bank since 1966, Afghanistan has tried to improve its infrastructure and agriculture sector with the foreign aid provided.¹³

Citing the economic and political disturbances with the reduction of foreign aid in the 1970s, Muhammad Daud took over the country in a coup and declared the Republic of Afghanistan in 1973. Daud tried to pursue liberal policies in the country and attempted to develop economic and military relations with Western countries. He also provided financial resources to Iran and various Arab countries. As a result of the Saur Revolt carried out by pro-Soviet groups in response to policies aiming at reducing Soviet influence in the country, Daud lost both power and his life. After this event, the country came under a Soviet influence that led to the direct invasion. The Soviet Union invaded the country on 27 December 1979 and aimed to rebuild the army and state structure against the mujahideen groups that had emerged in the country. In this respect, the Soviets made direct efforts politically, economically, and militarily and provided large-scale economic assistance. However, the mujahideen resistance also received significant economic and military aid from countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, China, and the US.¹⁴ Thus, the country became a battleground of the Cold War.

⁸ Malikyar and Rubin, *Center-periphery Relations in the Afghan State: Current Practices, Future Prospects*, 2002, 4.

⁹ Wahab and Youngerman, *A brief history of Afghanistan*, 2006, 108.

¹⁰ Rubin, *Political Elites in Afghanistan: Rentier State Building, Rentier State Wrecking*, 1992, 78.

¹¹ Shahrani, *State Building and Social Fragmentation in Afghanistan: A Historical Perspective*, 1986, 59.

¹² The World Bank, *The World Bank in Afghanistan*, 2021.

¹³ ADB, *Asian Development Bank Member Fact Sheet*, 2021.

¹⁴ Saikal and Maley, *Introduction*, 1989, 6.

After the Soviet withdrawal had been achieved with the support of the US, the country was plunged into a chaotic civil war between various groups. In this civil war, the warring groups were supported by various countries in line with their national interests. In this civil war environment, with the economic support and guidance of Pakistan, the Taliban movement was born and soon took over the country. Among the supporters of the Taliban leadership were not only Pakistan, but also energy companies originating from the US, Argentina, and Saudi Arabia.¹⁵ Although the Taliban reacted with a harsh administrative style during this period, it was not seen as a threat to the US, which was pursuing an anti-Iranian policy.¹⁶

The Taliban regime which dominated the country from 1996 to 2001 did not have enough capacity to manage the country economically and politically. It was not able to achieve acceptance as a legitimate actor in foreign relations either. Recognised only by the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the Taliban tried to govern the country with the foreign aid of these states. Unable to find the necessary support internationally, the Taliban regime's efforts to maintain an economic and political presence led to its association with terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda. According to Joe Sommerlad, Osama bin Laden paid the Taliban USD 20m annually for the protection Afghanistan provided him during this period. This process continued until al-Qaeda's attacks on the US on 11 September 2001.¹⁷

III. Post-2001 state-building policies and foreign aid

In response to the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration targeted Afghanistan and the Taliban regime for providing support to those responsible for the attack. Backed by special

forces, intelligence and close air support, the Northern Alliance quickly ousted the Taliban regime from power and made it leave the country. The US, which had no viable plan for the future, handed over responsibility for Afghanistan's reconstruction to the UN. The reconstruction of the country as a democratic state based on a liberal economy began with the Bonn Conference in December 2001.

The Bonn Treaty also covered a large foreign aid project for Afghanistan's reconstruction, including security, governance, and development. The responsibility for these three areas was taken over by various countries. The US was responsible for the re-establishment of the Afghan army. The responsibility for the Afghan police force was taken by Germany. The disarmament, demobilisation and re-integration of armed groups was planned to be supported by Japan. Counternarcotic efforts were given to the UK. Lastly, the establishment of the legal system was the responsibility of Italy.¹⁸

On 1 February 2006, security, governance, and development objectives were redefined by the "Afghanistan Compact". The Compact, which emerged as a result of the London Conference on Afghanistan, convened with the participation of many states and international organisations, was a continuation of the Bonn Agreement, which achieved its goal of democratic elections in 2005. The Compact covered three key areas, featuring an unrealistic expectation of projected times and targeted results. For example, by the end of 2010, extensive efforts were expected to have been made in the field of counternarcotics and the establishment of a national army, national police force and border police in the country. In the field of governance, it was envisaged that serious steps would be taken in the prevention of corruption, establishment of justice institutions, human rights and gender

¹⁵ Maley, *The Afghanistan wars*, 2002, 245.

¹⁶ Saikal, *Afghanistan's ethnic conflict*, 1998, 119.

¹⁷ Sommerlad, *Taliban and al-Qaeda: How are they linked?*, 2021.

¹⁸ Rynning, *NATO in Afghanistan: The Liberal Disconnect*, 2012, 45

within a timeframe ranging from 2006 to 2010.¹⁹ It soon became clear that these set times were unrealistic. Furthermore, the coordination of the efforts put forward in line with these goals was inadequate. The lack of ownership of targets and efforts by local elements was also a serious problem. These shortcomings, combined with the country's chronic problems, make it clear that the Afghanistan Compact failed to deliver.²⁰

The amount of non-military aid to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2020 stood at approximately USD 150bn. The main areas in which this aid was used were property reforms, the health system, education, and infrastructure investments. In statistical terms, some progress was made in these areas. However, these advances were not enough to solve Afghanistan's chronic problems. The most pressing issue is that since the aid could not be converted into sustainable investment, there was no solution to the country's dependence on the outside world. In this respect, the aid increased dependence on foreign aid rather than creating a self-sufficient country.²¹

Military aid to the country also reached significant amounts. This assistance had a highly positive effect on army and police construction activities in terms of arms and equipment and personnel numbers. However, the army and police forces did not reach sufficient levels in terms of quality and were not capable of carrying out the fight against the Taliban and various terrorist organisations. In this case, problems such as the inadequacy of political decision-making mechanisms, corrupted governance mechanisms and a recruitment process based on ethnicity rather than merit were identified by various sources. Apart from the inability to get a return on the

aid provided, it was evident that this aid was not sustainable and that the security forces did not make much sense without the aid.²²

Bribery and corruption are serious problems hindering the efficient use of foreign aid in Afghanistan, which ranks 165th out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perception Index 2020.²³ This perception adversely affected all activities relating to development and ensuring justice in the country and deeply shook trust in the administrators. Bribery and corruption reduced public confidence in the government, security forces and international efforts, disrupting economic development by damaging the tax system and the functioning of public services. Even more importantly, the public did not believe that these efforts would be successful. The perception that these activities were carried out as a part of the military operation made it difficult for local people to own them. The uncontrolled nature of the introduction of aid into the country was seen as another problem. There was no control over whom this money and aid was delivered to and under what conditions, and it could not be prevented from falling into the hands of pro-insurgency groups or warlords.

One of the most important factors of sustainable economic development is the legitimacy of the state system and government. Although a level of success was achieved on the basis of numbers, it is very difficult to say that state dominance, especially in rural areas, was fully achieved. The fact that the president could not be elected for a long time following the elections held in 2014 and 2019 – and that both sides accused each other of cheating in the elections – also negatively affected the reliability and legitimacy of the administration. Despite all these efforts, it is difficult to say that security was fully ensured within the

¹⁹ The London Conference on Afghanistan, *The Afghanistan Compact*, 2006.

²⁰ Mcloughlin, *Helpdesk Research Report: Experience of Compacts*, 2009.

²¹ Shah, *What did billions in aid to Afghanistan accomplish? 5 questions answered*, 2021.

²² Karimi, *Moving Away from Foreign Aid: A Case Study of Afghanistan*, 2020.

²³ Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index*, 2021.

country and state dominance was effective in this period. These considerable difficulties with security and legitimate state mechanisms, two important criteria of sustainable development, adversely affected the effectiveness of foreign aid.²⁴

The economic and political costs of the rebuilding policies of the failed Afghan state, which NATO and the US perceived as a threat to their own security, fell back on the political agenda due to the emergence of various security concerns, such as the situation in Syria and the threat of the so-called Islamic State. Humanitarian aid and reconstruction movements carried out with the use of soldiers in parallel with the military operation were reduced to the dimension of a social issue, not a security problem, due to these political and economic costs. The most important proof of this can be seen in the reduction of military operations to a lower level as of 2014, giving responsibility to Afghan institutions and reducing foreign aid.

IV. Foreign aid and the Taliban in the new era

The Taliban regime, which represented a serious security threat to the US and other Western countries in 2001, has suddenly started to be seen as a stabilising element against radical terrorist organisations in Afghanistan and the region. Despite this dramatic change in the country, the most important factor remaining unchanged is the dependence of the country's economy and sociocultural life on foreign aid. The fact that the aid received in line with the rentier state situation of the country could not be converted into production and sustainable development in any way, which had become evident during the Cold War, was a weakness that the country could not overcome.

Looking at the economic situation before the Taliban took over the country again, 43% of Afghanistan's GDP came from foreign aid. 75% of public expenditure was based on foreign aid and more than 90% of the country's population had a daily income of less than USD 2. The country's economic income was largely based on mining and agriculture. Gold, grapes, tropical fruits, nuts and insect resins were among the most important export goods to the UAE, India, Pakistan, China, and Turkey. However, the income from foreign trade only amounted to a third of the aid provided by the US in 2020.

Although it is known that the country has abundant natural resources, it cannot be assumed that these resources can be turned into an economic remedy. Another negative effect of the current situation is that the illegal production and trade of opium are widespread in the country. The opium trade has been a major economic strength of the Taliban regime as well as corrupt state officials. Other economic sources of the Taliban have been minerals, revenues and economic aid provided by Pakistan, Russia, Iran, and China. Although the Taliban regime has stated that it will not allow the production of drugs to establish relations with the outside world, it is expected that it will inevitably turn to this area due to the lack of foreign aid. Therefore, it needs to be kept in mind that economic problems and dependence on foreign aid were also serious problems in the pre-Taliban era.

It should be noted that the significant reduction in foreign aid to Afghanistan coincided with the start of US-Taliban peace talks. For example, in 2011, the amount of US military and non-military assistance was USD 6.2bn, which decreased to USD 4.5bn by 2020.²⁵ The Trump administration's "put America first"

²⁴ Ozdemir, *Deteriorating Proximity between Liberal Peacebuilding and Counterinsurgency: Warlordism and Corruption in Afghanistan*, 2019.

²⁵ Bizhan, *Afghanistan and its donors: a critical time*, 2020.

approach had a significant impact on this US policy shift. Accordingly, the administration reviewed foreign aid and assessed that Afghanistan's importance in terms of national security had decreased.²⁶ Although prominent figures such as General David Petraeus and General John R. Allen mentioned that the US was at risk of reducing foreign aid to countries such as Afghanistan in a security environment in which violent extremist groups still pose a serious threat, these warnings were not effective.²⁷ Another such example is the decrease of approximately AUD 30m in the amount of assistance that Australia envisaged for the post-deal period. In 2020, the increased effectiveness of the Taliban also negatively affected the aid sent to the country.²⁸ The deterioration of the security environment and the Taliban's seizure of the country's key border crossings raised concerns about foreign aid and severely affected the official sources of income of Ashraf Ghani's government.

In the new era, the hesitation to recognise the Taliban and uncertainty regarding the Taliban's political stance have led to a halt to foreign aid to the country. There is justification for this hesitation on the part of the donor countries in light of the seizure of the country by a structure that had been considered the most important threat in a struggle of nearly twenty years. The US, the European Union and the IMF are the main donors that have stopped aiding the country. From their perspective, the idea of using foreign aid as a means of political control over local actors is clearly understandable. However, this affects the population of the country rather than the permanency of the Taliban regime. A large part of the country's population has faced starvation and misery, while the deterioration of the country's security environment and the intensification of uncertainty have caused NGOs operating in the country and thousands

of aid workers working in these organisations to leave the country.²⁹

Therefore, the Taliban administration in Afghanistan, whose economic resources are mostly foreign aid, is seeking to establish both *de facto* and *de jure* relations with the outside world in order to protect this resource. For this reason, a major softening can be observed since the harsh and extremist discourses of the 1990s. However, when we look at their practices, it can be argued that the Taliban administration is still preserving its old identity. For example, the character of the interim government established is far from inclusive. This government structure gives the impression that there is power-sharing to protect the integrity of the Taliban administration, which consists of various groups. Beyond the hesitancy created by the ideological and social perspective of the Taliban, the lack of experienced governing bodies is seen as another problem. The main question is how efficiently foreign aid, which was not able to be used efficiently for serious reasons such as chronic corruption and mismanagement in the twenty-year pre-Taliban period, will now be used by the Taliban.

The Taliban administration will follow a policy of utilising any economic resource it can find to survive. In this case, in the middle of the global competition between the US and Western countries and countries such as China, Russia and Iran, the Taliban has the potential to be the scene of an economic power struggle between the two sides. Therefore, it will be possible to receive foreign aid from different sources. However, this foreign aid will only provide short-term, temporary solutions due to the inability to create a sustainable development plan and the lack of an experienced and qualified administrative staff with the capacity to develop relations with international actors.

²⁶ Tremblay-Boire, *US foreign aid, explained*, 2017.

²⁷ Kheel, *Retired generals urge Congress not to cut funds for diplomacy*, 2017.

²⁸ Bizhan, *Afghanistan and its donors: a critical time*, 2020.

²⁹ Shah, *What did billions in aid to Afghanistan accomplish? 5 questions answered*, 2021.

It is a fact that foreign aid is necessary to solve the human suffering in the country in the short term. Alternatives can be considered for the administration of this aid without leaving it to the Taliban administration alone. If it can be decided that the Taliban administration is the reality of Afghanistan in the long run, there is a serious imperative to direct this administration to a state that will contribute to global and regional stability and then respond to the needs and demands of the Afghan people. For this reason, in the current situation it has become clear once again that foreign aid is required for humanitarian purposes and as an effective tool for political goals.

V. Conclusion

Afghanistan has been an important actor in terms of both regional and global security and politics since 1747. There are some basic reasons why aid has not created the expected effectiveness in the country, which has a very deep history in terms of foreign aid. First, the aims of aid are shaped in line with the conjunctural political goals and interests of the donor countries rather than long-term results. Another important reason is the weakness of the country's civil administration system and social structure. The prevalence of corruption and bribery at bureaucratic levels and the fact that the public has remained indifferent to this situation caused the aid to be used in line with personal interests rather than the intended development processes. Again, short-term pragmatic political and security expectations of the donors left the aid flow under the control of a

mechanism dependent on the country's power elites instead of transparent control.

Foreign aid provided without solving the chronic problems of the country will not be able to create a sustainable development environment and will not go beyond saving the day as it was before. This situation, as experienced by the previous administration and various external actors, now faces the Taliban administration. The strong support of Pakistan for the Taliban creates the disadvantage that it is also seen as a political tool of an external power. Concessions made to extremist groups such as the Haqqani Network to maintain its structure and its inability to circumvent its past identity are also still serious problems for the Taliban in terms of gaining legitimacy.

Despite all this, there is no guarantee that the country will reach an environment of peace, tranquillity, and stability even if foreign aid is provided to the country. However, the inevitable truth is that there are millions of people in the country struggling with hunger and misery. The only hope of these people is foreign aid provided by the international community. The insolvency of these social and economic problems of the country may also lead to security threats such as uncontrolled migration and human resource supply for violent extremist groups. For this reason, a balance should be achieved between the use of international aid as a political tool in line with national interests and the potential creation of a cooperation environment in terms of human and global security.

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