

Biden's Decision to Seize Afghan Assets Is Immoral and Inhumane

Afghanistan is in the midst of a desperate humanitarian crisis, and the White House seems bent on deepening it.

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Last summer, amid America's chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, a dispute with France over nuclear submarines, and a speech to the United Nations in which President Biden declared, "America is back," one criticism started appearing again and again: [Joe Biden is just like Donald Trump](#).

If you squinted, you could see the broad outlines of a comprehensible critique—but it took a serious commitment to squinting to divine it. It went something a little like this: Biden was [withdrawing American troops](#) from Afghanistan, something Trump, who was often falsely labeled an isolationist, had [set in motion](#). "America is back" kind of sounded like a friendlier version of "America First," the Lindbergh-era slogan that Trump had revived—and Biden was putting America first by handing Afghanistan over to the Taliban. (Never mind that leaving Afghanistan was [broadly popular](#) with the public, that the [last three](#) presidents had pledged at various points to end U.S. involvement in the country, and that two decades of occupation had done little to prepare the country for life without the presence of American troops.)

On one point, however, there was some merit: On both the Afghanistan withdrawal and the conflict with France over a submarine deal, the Biden administration got tagged with the demerits associated with bungled execution and the creation of needless chaos—and in the case of the troop pullout, horrific suffering to boot. But Biden's critics were mostly making the comparison because, well, at the time, what could be more damaging than glibly comparing the current president to his immediate predecessor?

But the foundation of Trump's foreign policy wasn't isolationism, it was graft. Trump wanted to use the military as a kind of hyped-up gang: running a protection racket in Europe while robbing nearly everywhere else blind—and [encouraging a small universe of like-minded kleptocrats](#) to do the same. If anything sums up Trump's approach to foreign policy, it was his oft-repeated insistence that America's biggest mistake in Iraq was our failure to ["take](#)

[the oil.](#)” For Trump, the presence of the United States anywhere in the world demanded that we looted whatever was available to a strongman-backed military.

If those critiques of Biden’s foreign policy were a stretch back then, however, they have in recent days become considerably more apt. Shortly after the Taliban seized power in August, the United States [froze \\$7 billion](#) in assets that the previous Afghan government had at New York’s Federal Reserve. Last week, it announced that it would be [dividing those assets](#), instead of handing them back to those who need them most, while skimming off some plunder: \$3.5 billion would go to humanitarian aid for the people of Afghanistan, who are currently suffering through a horrific famine, with nearly 20 million at risk of going hungry. And the other \$3.5 billion would be redistributed to the families of victims of the September 11 attacks.

This last point is an outrage—it’s particularly unconscionable given that the current [humanitarian crisis](#) in Afghanistan is perhaps the largest in the world right now. Throughout the two-decade-long conflict, the United States has taken pains to insist that it was fighting terrorist groups and the Taliban in Afghanistan over their role in facilitating a base of operations for Al Qaeda. It was the regime, and not the people of that country, who bore some responsibility for the September 11 attacks. The ostensible mission behind the continued involvement of the U.S. military in Afghanistan was to help those blameless people lead better lives.

This decision is a betrayal of all that, as well as a betrayal of Biden’s promise to build a foreign policy built on cooperation and mutual respect. It will have serious repercussions for Afghanistan’s financial future, preventing the country from establishing a sound monetary policy, possibly for years. But it will be especially damaging to the people of Afghanistan, who are currently in the throes of extraordinary suffering—nearly the entire country could be experiencing famine by the end of this year. “The decision would create a problematic precedent for commandeering sovereign wealth and do little to address underlying factors driving Afghanistan’s massive humanitarian crisis,” Human Rights Watch executive director John Sifton [wrote](#) in a statement.

There is no foreign policy argument for seizing this money; it seems only to come down to domestic political considerations. The Biden administration fears the repercussions of handing money over to the Taliban, but it also fears the potential political cost of redistributing it via humanitarian assistance—something that Donald Trump and his various disciples would likely seize on. The Biden administration has insisted on placing onerous financial restrictions on Afghanistan that make it nearly impossible to send money into the country, another decision that has been disastrous for the Afghan people.

It’s true that no one has any guarantee that the Taliban won’t use that money to enrich itself—but that can’t be squared with the decision to risk half the \$7 billion kitty. Was the idea to simply steal as much as the Taliban might have done? This is not a decision guided by an authentic interest in ameliorating the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

All of this seems like some kind of cynical midterm election decision, designed to make up for the fact that the administration couldn’t or didn’t come through on a whole slew of popular policies to which it had been previously committed. If Biden’s administration goes through with this plan, it would be a moral black mark on top of previous bumbles. Biden entered office vowing to restore America’s standing in the world. Stealing billions of dollars from some of the poorest people in the world is a strange way of fulfilling that promise.

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Featured image: An Afghan man and children, suffering hardships from America's longest war, pose for a portrait in Kabul, Afghanistan, on March 19, 2021. [Source: theintercept.com]

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