

U.S. Policy Will Determine The Future of Afghan Crisis

With millions of Afghans on the “verge of death” [the UN](#)¹ and humanitarian agencies like the Red Cross have used language like “[livid](#)”² and “[terrified](#)”³ about this crisis. They’re urging the international community to release Afghanistan’s frozen assets and jump-start its banking system to avert economic collapse. Many Afghans, especially children, have [already lost their lives](#)⁴; [jobs and income](#)⁵ have disappeared; people can’t afford to buy food and mass starvation is occurring. U.S. policymakers must act urgently to prevent further catastrophe.

The recent [executive order](#)⁶ on disposition of Afghan assets splits the frozen reserves that are the property of the people of Afghanistan. It designated half of the funds for families of the September 11th attacks (pending court decisions) and deposited the other half into a newly created fund for aid for Afghanistan. The 9/11 families deserve compensation but not at the expense of the Afghan people who are experiencing extreme hardship. As the order is currently constructed it will fail to adequately address the crisis.

Congress should urge the administration to change its policy and encourage the administration to support a safeguarded mechanism to return the reserves through the existing infrastructure of Afghanistan’s Central Bank (Da Afghanistan Bank, DAB). Humanitarian and economic experts argue that continuing to hold the funds for uses other than for liquidity will further seriously damage an already-fragile Afghan economy endangering millions of Afghan lives, including approximately one million children who are in danger of severe malnutrition.

Unfreezing Afghan Funds in a Safeguarded Way Would Buoy Their Economy

Among many options to ensure that U.S. policy does not cause the Afghan economy to collapse, the U.S could slowly and gradually unfreeze the reserves on a monthly basis and release funds to Afghanistan’s central bank, Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), a civil, technocratic institution, that was created with strong support from the U.S and modeled after the Federal Reserve System. An initial trust-building process such as this would allow the bank to perform its core functions as well as using enhanced safeguards such as electronic auditing to ensure that reserves are not interfered with by the Taliban. Allowing the DAB to regulate the Afghan currency and run U.S. dollar auctions would serve to inject liquidity into the struggling economy and ease the pain that is being inflicted upon the population. If the Taliban fail to maintain the integrity and independence of the DAB, the United States can move to halt such payments and find other creative ways of injecting liquidity.

Steps Members of Congress Can Take

- **End the freeze on Afghanistan Central Bank funds** to inject liquidity into the collapsing Afghan economy. Support allowing the Afghan Central Bank having access to the funds in a safeguarded way.
- **Support legislation such as [Rep. Jayapal’s amendment to the COMPETES Act](#)** that encouraged Afghan humanitarian needs to be taken into account in developing sanctions and asset freeze policies.
- **Loosen U.S. sanctions** to mitigate the chilling effect of restrictions on foreign banks and businesses, while offering Afghan banks access to their overseas holdings and to the global financial system.
- **Pledge additional emergency funding** toward the United Nations’ 2022 humanitarian aid appeal, and dedicate the necessary diplomatic capital to encourage Western partners to contribute their fair share.
- **Support the [Afghanistan Adjustment Act](#) to allow permanent status for refugees and generally increase refugee assistance** to Afghan refugees including increased resettlement here in the U.S.

1 UN chief urges US, World Bank to release funds for Afghans on ‘verge of death,’ France 24, January 14, 2022

2 Farge, Emma, Red Cross ‘livid’ that sanctions, frozen aid stoking Afghan crisis, Reuters, November 22, 2021

3 Gold, Shabtai, WFP’s Afghanistan chief ‘terrified’ as hunger and despair mount, Devex, January 27, 2022

4 Shelton, Tracey, Aid groups deal with ‘painfully thin and lifeless children’ as Afghan food crisis deepens, ABC, January 20, 2022

5 Bair, Heather, More Than 500,000 Afghans Have Lost Jobs Since Taliban Takeover, Report Shows, Newsweek, January 19, 2022

6 Executive Order on Protecting Certain Property of Da Afghanistan Bank for the Benefit of the People of Afghanistan, White House, February 11, 2022

Congress Must Vote to End U.S. Military Support in Yemen War

President Biden's [announcement last February](#)¹ that "we are ending all American support for offensive operations in the war in Yemen including relevant arms sales" was a welcome breath of fresh air. Sadly, since then, U.S. support has continued in the form of the maintenance, logistical support, and spare parts that enable Saudi airplanes and attack helicopters to continue raining deadly ordnance on Yemeni civilians. In the last few months, the conflict has grown more violent, the economy is on the verge of collapse, and as the [UN's World Food Programme chief said](#)² "We're literally looking at 16 million people marching towards starvation." This is a man-made humanitarian catastrophe engineered by indiscriminate military attacks on civilian targets.

Congress Can Mandate a Definitive End to U.S. Support for the War in Yemen

- Despite promises to end U.S. support for the Saudi human rights violations, support for the Air Force infrastructure that enables the continued attacks and blockade has continued. April 2021, the Department of Defense confirmed that the US continues [to support the Saudi-led coalition](#).³ Fundamentally, if we continue to maintain and equip the Saudi armed forces, the administration's commitment to only supporting "defensive operations" can not be fulfilled. Even the air-to-air missiles approved last year portrayed as defensive can be [used as a tool to enforce the blockade](#)⁴ on Yemen by increasing Saudi ability to threaten aircraft trying to land in Sana'a airport.
- The most effective way for Congress to ensure that the United States is not engaging in Saudi-led hostilities that are part of this tragic war is to invoke its war powers through a war powers resolution.

Ending Support Means Blocking Arms Transfers to the Saudi Military

- Last fall, the Senate failed to block a massive \$650 million weapons transfer to Saudi Arabia. Predictably, the fighting has escalated since then.
- There have been consistent and widespread human rights violations committed with helicopters during this war. A 2015 attack killed dozens of Yemeni fishers. A 2015 airstrike killed 30 civilians, including first responders. A 2017 Apache helicopter strike on a boat filled with UN credentialed Somali refugees killed at least 40 people. Yet an arms transfer of military helicopters was approved in 2021 as well.

The Blockade of Yemen is a Leading Driver of the Humanitarian Crisis

The administration has, unfortunately, sought to downplay the Saudi role in the disastrous blockade of Yemen — going as far as to say "[there is no blockade](#)"⁵ while people are dying because of food and fuel shortages. At a minimum, the administration appears to be tacitly accepting the blockade. The healthcare system in Yemen, during the COVID crisis, is [now under immense pressure as fuel shortages](#)⁶ prevent hospitals from providing services. Members of Congress should press the administration to do more to end the blockade.

Steps Members of Congress Can Take

- **In the House, support and cosponsor the [War Powers Resolution being introduced by Reps. Jayapal and DeFazio](#) that end all US support for the calamitous war in Yemen. In the Senate, introduce and support a similar War Powers Resolution.**
- **Oppose arms sales/contracts** to Saudi Arabia that support the continuing war and humanitarian crisis.
- **Oppose designation of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization** which [harms aid efforts](#).
- **Publicly speak out and pressure the administration** to push the Saudis to end the blockade of Yemen.

1 Biden, Joseph, *Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World*, White House Briefing Room, February 4, 2021

2 *Millions in Yemen 'a step away from starvation*, UN News, September 22, 2021

3 The US may still be helping Saudi Arabia in the Yemen war after all, Alex Ward, Vox, April 27, 2021

4 Hartung, William, *The Biden Administration's Missile Sale to Saudi Arabia Is Offensive, and Must Be Stopped*, Forbes, November 28, 2021

5 Ward, Alex, "*It is not a blockade*": US says Saudi Arabia isn't to blame for Yemen's fuel shortage, Vox, April 14, 2021

6 *Deadly Consequences: Obstruction of Aid in Yemen During Covid-19*, Human Rights Watch, September 14, 2020

Key Tools for the Ukraine Crisis: Diplomacy, Deescalation & Aid

Bold & Sustained Negotiation is Urgently Needed to Save Ukrainian Lives

Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine and gross human rights violations are causing immense human suffering. There is no viable military solution, despite the bravery and unity displayed by the Ukrainian people. Diplomacy must not stop during battle – in fact, it becomes even more urgent to stop the bloodshed and save lives.

While it's unclear whether Russia is yet willing to negotiate diplomatic off-ramps, the U.S. must seek to prevent the unthinkable alternative. The best way to save lives is to find a way to craft a settlement that would encourage Russia to withdraw all its forces. As one European diplomat [said recently](#)¹: "It's like the Sun Tzu thing of giving your enemy a golden bridge to retreat across. How do you get him to go in a different direction?". Both Putin and Zelensky have broached neutrality and a solution should be explored that would respect Ukraine's sovereignty while maintaining neutrality – akin to precedents with Finland or Austria. Arms control measures about nuclear weapons and missiles could also be part of a possible off-ramp.

Another complementary diplomatic move could involve sanctions. RAND's [Samuel Charap](#), [writes](#)² that lifting some sanctions could "push Putin to abandon his core war aim of decapitating the Ukrainian government and installing a pro-Russian puppet. Using relief of the central bank sanctions, for example, to compel a cease-fire and a negotiated settlement would not only minimize human suffering in Ukraine, but it could also signal the limits of Western intentions, making clear the sanctions are not about overthrowing Putin's regime."

Mission Critical: Build a Firewall Against Escalation

Congress Members should speak out publicly and tamp down escalation to prevent a potentially catastrophic world war. They can reinforce Congressional war powers, making it clear that they do not support sending U.S. troops or pilots into the battle and opposing escalatory tactics like a "No Fly Zone." A "No Fly Zone", and other direct U.S. interventions, are euphemisms for a shooting war between the world's two biggest nuclear powers.

Loose militaristic talk about "[bloodying Putin's nose](#)"³ should not be reinforced by policymakers. The U.S. should be working to protect Ukrainian lives, not treating the people as a vehicle to confront the Russian autocrat. Instead, Congress can promote "deconfliction" and deescalation measures, by "[avoiding new](#)"⁴ and destabilizing military deployments, dangerous encounters between Russian and NATO forces, and the introduction of new types of conventional or nuclear weapons that undermine shared security interests."

Centering Civilian Protection: Humanitarian Aid & Refugee Assistance

Congress should increase humanitarian and economic aid and assistance for displaced Ukrainians at a more generous level that meets this challenge. Diplomatic pressure should be brought to bear to support the Ukrainian effort on humanitarian corridors. U.S. support to Ukraine over the last year has had a lopsided military emphasis. Now, with a million refugees and counting, we need to increase resources for humanitarian aid, refugee assistance and resettlement. Globally, we are facing the worst refugee crisis since WWII. The U.S. refugee cap should be significantly increased [to protect at least 250,000](#)⁵ people. Congress should support refugee programs reflecting racial equity and on a scale sufficient to meet the challenge.

Centering civilian protection means ensuring that sanctions with economy-wide impacts don't lead to humanitarian harm. Holding the Russian government and the oligarchs backing it responsible is critical right now. But Congress must perform oversight to make sure the U.S. is not engaging in "[collective punishment](#)."⁶ Sanctions' economic impact can cause dire public health consequences, including [malnutrition and increased infant mortality](#).⁷ It would be ironic indeed if sanctions were to punish the ordinary Russians who have shown such extraordinary courage in openly opposing their leaders' brutality. More broadly, sanctions have become a "tool of first resort" for the U.S. – their use has gone up by 933% over the last two decades. Congress must [enact reforms](#)⁸ to evaluate the impact of sanctions and remove those that are harming civilians.

The Ukraine Crisis Doesn't Justify Increased Pentagon Budget Growth

Since the start of the war in Afghanistan, Pentagon spending had totaled roughly **\$14 trillion dollars**¹⁰ with one-third to one-half of the total going to military contractors. **Increased spending was sold as needed to “deter Putin” and “defeat the Taliban”. It didn't work.** Congress must ask that the Pentagon make whatever adjustments necessary, **without what analyst Bill Hartung warns might lead to**¹¹ “an open-ended commitment that would boost U.S. military involvement in Europe back towards Cold War levels, or create a loosely regulated slush fund like the account that was used to finance the Iraq and Afghan wars.” This crisis also shows just how dangerous nuclear weapons are, we need to redouble efforts for nuclear arms control and disarmament, not invest in new weapons systems and a new nuclear arms race.

This Crisis Underlines the Need for a US Foreign Policy Reset

This war should be a wakeup call that it is time to invest in peace and human security and redouble efforts to *prevent* political violence. At the same time, non-military challenges are proving to be our nation's gravest threats. One million people have died of COVID in the U.S., yet we have underfunded our healthcare systems and done far less than we should to ensure global vaccine equity. Damaging severe weather events caused by climate change are ravaging our communities. Yet the defense budget continues to grow.

When it comes to conflict prevention, diplomacy is an underpublicized, underutilized and underfunded tool. The Pentagon budget is **13 times larger than**¹² the combined budgets of the State Department and USAID. Many top U.S. **diplomats and analysts warned**¹³ of the risks of increased tensions or war that NATO expansion posed and the need for a **sustainable peace and security architecture for Europe**.¹⁴ While Russia is 100% responsible for its unconscionable invasion, critical opportunities were missed to work harder and smarter to avoid this war.

The U.S. also must ensure that our own policies do not fuel conflict and instability through military intervention and weapons sales to oppressive governments. Greater moral consistency, a U.S. that opposes the bombing of Kyiv and ends support for the Saudi bombing of Sana'a in Yemen, would be a powerful foreign policy tool.

Steps Members of Congress Can Take

- **Focus emergency funding for Ukraine on civilian protection** including humanitarian aid and refugee assistance and resettlement.
- **Speak out against and vote to oppose** military contractors and the Pentagon using this crisis to grow the already bloated military budget.
- **Hold Russia's leadership accountable for their aggression** by going after hidden assets and through targeted penalties that do not punish the entire Russian public for the crimes of their leaders.
- **Oppose open-ended, broad-based sanctions** that cause serious humanitarian damage to Russian civilians.
- **Lift refugee caps** to make more generous room for refugees from Ukraine. This must be done in an equitable way that includes equally deserving refugees from Afghanistan, Syria etc.
- **Members of the House should cosponsor H. Res. 877** – the Foreign Policy for 21st Century Act.

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8 Corrado, Megan and Paul Carroll, *Sanctions Review Fails to Review Sanctions: Congress Should Step In*, Just Security, November 2, 2021

9 Edmondson, Catie, *Biden Administration Asks for \$10 Billion to Support Ukraine*, New York Times, March 2, 2022

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