

Afghanistan: How did it go so wrong?

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the various factors that contributed to the defeat of the US-led Coalition in Afghanistan and the failure of their nation-building program. The analysis builds off of government documents, historical records, and a variety of other sources to explain just how this multi-billion-dollar fiasco went sideways. Furthermore, this piece expands on the reasons for failure and delves into lessons the US and its allies should take from their rout and how they can change their strategies going forward.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Taliban, Nation Building, Democratisation

I. Introduction

The US' failures in Afghanistan remain one of the most embarrassing chapters in its recent history. After trillions¹ of dollars spent, thousands of lives, and over 20 years, the United States withdrew from Afghanistan with very little to show for its work. How the world's best-funded and equipped military could not defeat the comparatively far worse Taliban confounded many in the West. After the US and its allies' success in Iraq and early success in removing the Taliban from power, many Western experts had thought Afghanistan was on the path towards becoming a stable democracy and were shocked at how it diverged. Military and political failures, the Taliban, and complex mechanisms of the US-led coalition all played a role in their lack of success. As such, this paper will seek to examine the

relevance of these factors to the overall defeat of Western forces in Afghanistan and determine what lessons can be gleaned from said defeat.

II. Historical Comparisons

Naturally, the US is not the only great power to have failed in Afghanistan. Its nickname as the "graveyard of empires" is wholly deserved; aside from the US, the USSR, Alexander the Great, and countless more have suffered defeat within its borders. Yet describing Afghanistan as such fails to account for the toll these relentless attacks have taken on its people, land, and resources.² Ultimately, despite the huge price the US paid for its failures in Afghanistan, it is Afghanistan itself that has suffered the most.

¹ Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan (The White House, 2021)

² Baker, Kevin. *The Old Cliché About Afghanistan That Won't Die*. (Politico, 2021).

In terms of comparisons with the US' failures in Afghanistan, the botched invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR in 1979 is perhaps the best example available. Fearing that the Americans would gain a potential stronghold directly bordering the USSR, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan under the guise of supporting a socialist revolution. Just as the US partook in the Vietnam War due to fears of the Domino Effect and Communist imperialism spreading around the world, the USSR saw Afghanistan as the next hotspot in the superpower confrontation of capitalism versus communism.³ When a Soviet-backed government fell due to a combination of infighting, religious extremism, and the eventual assassination of its leader, the Soviets intervened, launching their invasion on Christmas Eve in 1979.

When Soviet ground forces ran into trouble defeating the largely guerilla-style insurgency, a decision was made to deploy even more ground troops to help defend major cities, freeing up the local allied Afghan forces to do the bulk of the fighting. Along with this increased deployment came the removal of the Soviets' main allied figurehead leader in Afghanistan and the creation of a new government, one designed to follow every whim, beckon, and call of its Soviet masters.

Despite the Soviet's ease in removing the existing Afghan government and neutralising most unloyal elements of the Afghan army, a sustained guerilla campaign

cost them dearly. Nearly a million Soviet troops⁴ served in Afghanistan over the course of the invasion, with nearly 50,000 casualties, over 15 billion Rubles spent, and billions more lost through damage and destruction of equipment.⁵

Part of this can be attributed to Afghanistan's rough terrain. Its combination of high-altitude mountains and plateaus made air support difficult, and its sandy deserts proved difficult for tanks and other armoured vehicles to handle, leading to large repair costs and countless vehicles lost altogether. Given this was the Soviet Union's first armed conflict since the end of the Second World War that faced large-scale opposition, its troops lacked desert fighting experience, and in general, the Soviet Union's war machine was untested. Furthermore, tactics employed by the USSR resembled those used during its invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, a conflict that did not see much opposition from guerilla warfare elements.

Mounting Soviet losses in terms of men, land, and equipment put pressure on Soviet Military leadership to achieve successes, so that, at the very least, the high costs of the invasion could be justified. However, a larger issue arose as the general thinking of Soviet officers and leadership was that military victories could only be achieved through escalation, through the increased deployment of troops and other military assets. As such, a cycle arose where increased deployment of resources would

³ Gompert, D. C., Binnendijk, H., & Lin, B. *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979*. (RAND Corporation, 1979).

⁴ Gandomi, Jonathan. *Lessons from the Soviet Occupation in Afghanistan for the United States and NATO*. (Journal of Public and International Affairs, 2008).

⁵ *The Costs of Soviet Involvement in Afghanistan*. (Central Intelligence Bureau, 1987).

lead to increased losses, which would then lead to increased demand for success, and then more deployment of resources. The Soviet Union became trapped in a quagmire, where escalation was the dominating paradigm, and where no one wanted to propose cutting their losses out of fear for having to take responsibility for an embarrassing military failure.⁶

Not to be underestimated are the fighting capabilities of the Afghani resistance. The Mujahideen, famously funded and equipped by the CIA and other Western nations put up a fierce fight against the much larger and better-equipped Soviet Army. While the Mujahideen failed to replace the Soviet-backed government, they were able to handily defeat them militarily.⁷ Additionally, the significant aid in the form of weapons, financial support, training, and intelligence from other nations bolstered the abilities of the Mujahideen, allowing them to fight a more technologically sophisticated and competent resistance.

Outdated tactics that didn't fit the conditions of Afghanistan, a doctrine of escalation, and an effective resistance all played important roles in the Soviet Union's failure in Afghanistan. Further issues such as a general dislike of Communism among Afghans, failure of Soviet propaganda, and a perceived illegitimate government all compounded the Soviet's problems. Eventually, the Soviets

withdrew after 10 long years of fighting, having suffered major losses physically, financially, and reputationally.

III. How the Invasion of Afghanistan Came to Be

After the Soviets' defeat in Afghanistan, the country entered a period of political chaos. The USSR-backed regime of Mohammad Najibullah managed to stay in power after the Soviet withdrawal up until its eventual collapse in 1992. The power vacuum left by the collapse of the Najibullah government led to a power struggle and subsequent civil war, as internal factions supported by different foreign powers seized territory and divided the country up. Neighbouring countries in the Middle East saw the conflict as an opportunity to push their ideologies and develop their influence in the region. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, among others all played parts in furthering the conflict.⁸

It was in the midst of this conflict that the Taliban emerged from the former Mujahideen which had fought against the USSR. Due to feelings that their political desires for the return of Islamic law were not being properly heard by the rest of the Mujahideen, the Taliban split off and formed their own group. The group quickly achieved military successes, taking over much of Southern Afghanistan with little resistance, after which they implemented Sharia law under a strict law and order approach to governing.⁹ Having either convinced local

⁶ Reuvany, Rafael & Aseem Prakesh. *The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union*. (Review of International Studies, 1999).

⁷ Paul, Christopher, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill. *Detailed Overviews of 30 Counterinsurgency Cases*. (RAND Corporation, 2010).

⁸ Ahmed, Samina. *Civil War in Afghanistan*. (Institute for Global Dialogue, 2001).

⁹ Ghufuran, Nasreen. *The Taliban and the Civil War Entanglement in Afghanistan*. (Asian Survey, 2001).

warlords to fight with them or removed them from relevance, the Taliban quickly grew in size and strength, eventually seizing control of Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, in 1996. At this point, the other parties in the civil war, realising their infighting had allowed the Taliban to gain great amounts of power and land, decided to unite as the Northern Alliance, and come together against their common enemy.

Confined to the northern parts of the country, the aptly named Northern Alliance struggled to combat the Taliban, facing material and manpower shortages, and despite some support from foreign powers, could not dislodge the Taliban. UN-mediated efforts to end the conflict and bring peace failed, leaving the fighting ongoing.¹⁰ The conflict stayed relatively stable, with neither side making much headway, up until the 2001 9/11 Attacks, committed by the Taliban-sheltered Al-Qaeda terrorist group. The US invoked NATO's Article 5 and called all member states into the fight against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

While the combined might of NATO and the Northern Alliance managed to take back most of the country and greatly limit Taliban advances, they were unable and unwilling to maintain the continuous presence required to prevent the Taliban from eventually taking the country back.

IV. Military Failures in Afghanistan

With hundreds of billions of dollars a year in funding, the US is often considered the world's premier military

power, with a well-trained and equipped fighting force. Additionally, having learned lessons from the failures of the Soviet Union and the success of the Mujahideen, any lack of military might was not a primary cause of the US' failures in Afghanistan. However, the behaviour and conduct of US and NATO forces inside the country likely played a role in allowing for the Taliban's return.

In the face of military losses, some in the Pentagon's chain of command fell into the same trap the Soviets found themselves in during their invasion; escalation. Calling for more military action and more freedom for forces in Afghanistan to fight back led the US to become further ingrained in the conflict. More importantly, these looser rules of engagement led to more civilian casualties, arguably the biggest of the US' military mistakes in Afghanistan.¹¹

As seen in the below figure, the US presence in Afghanistan continuously ramped up for the first 10 years of the invasion, as with the USSR's Military Command, escalation was the doctrine of choice for the US-led NATO Coalition. It was only after a long decade of fighting without an end in sight when the American public, political system, and military considered that perhaps relentless escalation was not the proper answer.

¹⁰ Magnus, Ralph H. *Afghanistan in 1996: Year of the Taliban*. (Asian Survey, 1997).

¹¹ Gossman, Patricia. *How US-Funded Abuses Led to Failure in Afghanistan*. (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

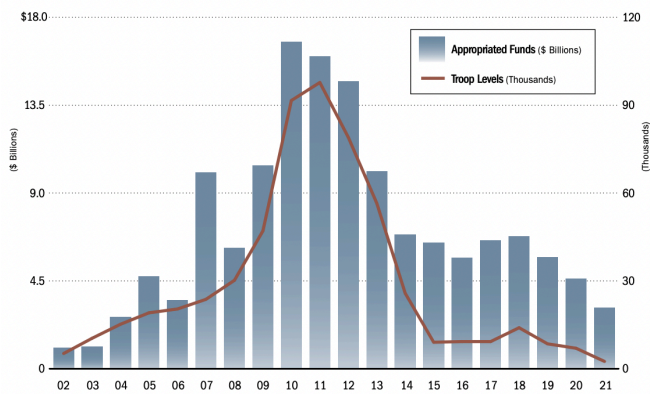


Fig. 1: U.S. Appropriations and U.S. Troop Levels in Afghanistan by Fiscal Year, 2002–2021.
Source: SIGAR, 2021.

Airstrikes, often based on false or misunderstood intelligence, led to the deaths of thousands of civilians in Afghanistan. While civilian casualties are always an unfortunate side effect of war, the scope of the civilian casualties was often due to overly-relaxed rules of engagement.¹² At one point, deaths from the US-led coalition airstrikes actually overtook deaths caused by the Taliban. Women and children suffered especially; children alone made up 40% of airstrike casualties between 2016 and 2020.¹³ Beyond the horrors of civilian casualties, the use of airstrikes as a replacement for troops on the ground also had harmful effects. While they were a much easier pill for Western governments to swallow, their widespread use led to the Afghan army becoming dependent on air power,

creating an unsustainable reliance on a large-scale continued Western military presence in Afghanistan.¹⁴

While the US and other coalition members were able to temporarily conceal their war crimes from the public,¹⁵ they could not hide them from the Afghani people. Summary executions, deaths resulting from torture, and other war crimes were undoubtedly noticed and had clear impacts on the trust of many Afghans in the Coalition forces. As such, it is likely that in many cases, the benefit of military victories was often outweighed by the cost in civil deaths. Furthermore, Coalition war crimes only drove more people into the open arms of the Taliban, augmenting their ranks and helping them spread guerilla warfare throughout Coalition-controlled lands.

However, the US and its foreign allies were not the only ones committing war crimes. Their local allies, the Northern Alliance, played a major role in alienating many Afghans from supporting the US-backed government. Often pillaging and marauding through areas after having retaken them from the Taliban, the North Alliances and other allied warlords' murder and rape of civilians allowed for the Taliban to retake previously captured land and slow the Coalition's advances.¹⁶ Regardless of whether or not the US had control over its allies' behaviour, in the eyes of many Afghans, it was linked nonetheless.

¹² Crawford, Neta. *Afghanistan's Rising Death Toll due to Airstrikes*. (Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs, 2020).

¹³ 40% of all civilian casualties from airstrikes in Afghanistan – almost 1,600 – in the last five years were children. (Reliefweb, 2021).

¹⁴ Cordesman, Anthony H. *'Peace' as the Vietnamization of a U.S. Withdrawal?* (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)).

¹⁵ Philipps, Dave. *Pentagon Begins Inquiry into Special Ops and War Crimes*. (The New York Times, 2021).

¹⁶ Gossman, *How US-Funded Abuses Led to Failure in Afghanistan*.

Using warlords to help rule and enforce law and order on captured territory was a key tenet of the US military doctrine for fighting against the Taliban. The US believed that they needed to have some kind of local presence on the ground, as foreign troops would never be fully trusted. Instead, this plan backfired in many instances. Warlords often acted with impunity, committing war crimes, raping, stealing, and forcing countless other untold horrors onto the populations of land they controlled.¹⁷ These warlords, who had been entrusted with the responsibility of security and safeguarding, did the very opposite, in the process indoctrinating many against the democratically elected government. Despite the huge amount of security forces in their country, Afghans consistently stated by huge majorities that they still felt unsafe.¹⁸

Aside from local militias and warlords, the official Afghan army also faced similar problems, leading to a lack of legitimacy and support from many. Hugely corrupt and inefficient, the army often failed to enforce law and order, and its predatory behaviour led many to join the Taliban more out of opposition to it than support for the Taliban.¹⁹ The army's failures were just one component in the broader issue of the democratic government's lack of legitimacy, but its failures had ramifications beyond just that. With security often a top issue for Afghans, and the army being some of their most direct contact with the

government, the poor shape of the Afghan military enabled the Taliban to continue recruiting in the face of heavy losses.²⁰

In many cases, prisoners who weren't summarily executed upon capture were taken prisoner, an experience many did not survive. Even those whose links to the Taliban were only suspected were in some cases subject to torture and mistreatment. Prison conditions were horrid, crowded, and unsanitary, leading many who survived the order to rejoin the Taliban shortly after their release. Rehabilitation was not a policy pursued by the prison system, which served essentially to keep Taliban fighters off the battlefield as long as possible, an unsustainable strategy that eventually ended up backfiring for the US; some of the leaders of the Taliban's final offensive that led it to retake control of the country had at one point been imprisoned by the Coalition.²¹

Despite the US military's massive size and funding, it still outsources countless parts of its military operation from logistics to security to even some military operations. Hence emerged a world of private military companies, (PMCs) a form of modern-day mercenaries. Perhaps the most famous (or infamous) of the PMCs is Blackwater, a firm started by a former Navy SEAL. Blackwater was hired in multiple capacities in Afghanistan; counternarcotics, security, supply, and transport, among others. The

¹⁷ "Today we shall all die" | *Afghanistan's Strongmen and the Legacy of Impunity*. (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

¹⁸ Cordesman, 'Peace' as the Vietnamization of a U.S. Withdrawal?

¹⁹ Pandya, Amit. *Afghanistan and Pakistan: More Realism Needed to Prevent US Failure*. (Stimson Center, 2009).

²⁰ Rahimullah Yusufzai. *16 Years of US Presence in Afghanistan: Objectives, Strategies and Emerging Scenario*. (Policy Perspectives, 2018).

²¹ Gossman, *How US-Funded Abuses Led to Failure in Afghanistan*.

countless war crimes likely perpetrated by these groups, who often operate in a legal grey zone as non-state actors, undoubtedly hurt the reputation of Coalition and Afghan forces.²² Instead of carrying out these important operations by the rules and with US or Coalition forces, the Pentagon took the easier route and outsourced it to PMCs for more effective and easy results, at the cost of public opinion. These wholly unnecessary actions could have been avoided had the Pentagon taken the high road.²³

Beyond the military, Afghan police forces were severely undertrained, underfunded, and underequipped, inhibiting a key aspect of governance and security. The Afghan National Police was rife with corruption, and despite some attempts to train and arm officers, was not a force able to defend itself, let alone the rule of law.²⁴ While the military was often deployed to the frontlines and conflict zones, the police were left to defend wide swathes of land, a task they failed miserably at, allowing the Taliban to foment insurrections and other guerilla-style activities.

V. Democratic Failures in Afghanistan

Naturally, however, the war in Afghanistan was not lost solely due to military failures. The failure of the Coalition to create a democratic government that was legitimate in the eyes of Afghans enhanced support for the Taliban. Naturally, most Afghans were unwilling to fight for a

government that they did not believe in, consider legitimate, or feel connected to. Hence, the Taliban was able to seize on this dissatisfaction and use it to their advantage, aiding it in recruitment, and propaganda, and ultimately led to most Afghans resigning themselves to their eventual takeover.

However, it was not always this way; following the takedown of the Taliban, hope for democracy in the country was strong. Voter turnout for the first democratic elections in Afghanistan in 2004 was 68%, a figure higher than what many Western Democracies typically have. Despite this excellent start, things only went downhill, with failure after failure causing support for democracy to hemorrhage, leading to turnout for the 2019 elections being less than 10%, an astounding dropoff.²⁵

Many issues with Afghanistan's failed democracy stem from the way in which it was designed. Following the defeat of the Taliban, Western nations created a strong unitary system of government in Afghanistan. However, as a highly diverse and tribal-dominated environment, the fragmented nature of Afghan society was not reflected in the design of its government.²⁶ As such, power struggles and infighting emerged as different societal groups competed for power that was not easily shared between them. For many Afghans, the centralization of power also harkened back to the era of Soviet influence in

²² ICRC Resource Center. *A Humanitarian Perspective on the Privatization of Warfare*. (Global Policy Forum, 2012).

²³ Wood, Ruairidh. *Promoting Democracy or Pursuing Hegemony? An Analysis of U.S. Involvement in the Middle East*. (Journal of Global Faultlines, 2019).

²⁴ Jones, Seth G. *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*. (RAND Corporation, 2008).

²⁵ Sopko, John F., and David H. Young. *The Factors Leading to the Collapse of the Afghan Government and Its Security Forces*. (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2023).

²⁶ Murtazashvili, Jennifer. *The Collapse of Afghanistan*. (Journal of Democracy, January, 2022)

Afghanistan, when power was likewise consolidated into the hands of a few handpicked communist cronies. This comparison made many Afghans uncomfortable with this idea of a unitary government from the beginning.²⁷

Furthermore, pressure to change the design of the government in order to make it more appealing to the wider public was easily rebutted. Western nations were drawn to the allure of the more direct and uncomplicated democracy the unitary system provided, and Afghan leaders were drawn to the power it gave them, as each felt it would let them keep all the power and withhold it from their rivals.²⁸

Additionally, in an attempt to prevent the Mujahideen and Taliban from exerting influence on the newborn democratic process, candidates for the parliament were banned from aligning with a political party. However, with a parliament full of technically independent MPs, political party identity, a key factor in the sustainability of any democratic system, was non-existent.²⁹ While eventually, this restriction was loosened, the parliament remained a weak body, with the vast majority of political, constitutional, and financial powers. The failure of the forming of strong political parties meant that Afghan politics remained largely tribal and prevented national unity from forming.

Also key to the downfall of Afghan democracy were its leaders. As previously mentioned, the unitary system amassed power with the executive branch, giving the Afghan president direct control over large portions of the government, economy, judiciary, and many other aspects related to the governance of Afghanistan. However, many leaders ended up abusing that power, to the detriment of Afghanistan's perception of democracy. Leaders such as Aschraf Ghani surrounded themselves with people from their tribes, filling positions of power almost exclusively with his close allies, allowing them to enrich themselves through widespread corruption and embezzlement.³⁰

As Ghani's power grew, so too did his list of enemies. His micromanagement of judges, generals, and advisors led to inconsistency and uncertainty both within the government and outside it, and the high rate of staff turnover was certainly not helpful for the running of the Afghan state and military.³¹ While not an underlying cause of the failure of democracy, Ghani's behaviour during his presidency, a period of time during a key juncture in the period of Western involvement in Afghanistan, absolutely destabilised the government and only gave the Taliban more propaganda material to use against the democratic government. His semi-authoritative style of governance disappointed many in the Western World, who had thought, given his experience working at the World Bank,

²⁷ Owens, Rachel. *The Failure of State Building in Afghanistan*. (Stanford Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, 2024).

²⁸ Murtazashvili, *The Collapse of Afghanistan*.

²⁹ Murtazashvili, *The Collapse of Afghanistan*.

³⁰ Murtazashvili, *The Collapse of Afghanistan*.

³¹ Sopko, *The Factors Leading to the Collapse of the Afghan Government and Its Security Forces*.

that he would be a technocratic leader who would help streamline the workings of the Afghan government.³²

Despite Ghani's issues as a leader, he was not at all unique. Corruption had long been identified as a serious and endemic issue within the Afghan government even from the very beginning under its first President Karzai.³³ Political power became linked with the ability to commit corrupt acts and embezzle Western funds, meaning the battle for political office became increasingly important for each tribe, as they all wanted to be the richest and prevent their rivals from gaining access to those resources. This led to many elected officials trying to embezzle as much money as possible before their term ended, as they wanted both to gain as much money as possible but also to use as much funds up as they could before that source of income could be turned over to someone from a rival group. As such, elections became hotly contested issues, as major tribes and their leaders would allege fraud and interference if the results were not to their liking. With important figures in their communities constantly flip-flopping between calling elections rigged or defending against those very same claims, it is no surprise that many Afghans became fed up and dissatisfied with democracy.

Naturally, Western donor nations and organisations were well aware of this issue and had taken steps to minimise its effects, often creating parallel institutions to do the work for them, for example, the US-led Provincial Reconstruction Teams, which served as alternate governing

³² *Why the Afghan Government Collapsed*. (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2022).

³³ *Why the Afghan Government Collapsed*.

organisations.³⁴ While these types of organisations were able to get around some of the corruption, they also delegitimized the Afghan government. For better or for worse, the Afghan government was recognized by most Afghans as having at least some power, so having a foreign power come in and replace them hardly bolstered their image. Not only did this undermine the government and its officials, but it also led to more disputes. Despite local organisations already doing most of the work a government traditionally does, many Western donors insisted on creating their own institutions, a policy that generally backfired.³⁵

Yet, the failure of democracy in Afghanistan to replace the Taliban may not have been related to the specific structure or design of the Afghan democracy, nor any fault of the US. A 2013 study³⁶ found that in countless cases, countries struggled with the transition to democracy after the forced removal of an authoritarian regime, especially when said removal was backed or led by foreign powers, an archetype that Afghanistan fits perfectly. As such, it may very well be that the conditions in place were simply not receptive to the emergence of a democratic government, condemning any attempt at democratic governance in Afghanistan to failure. Nonetheless, it is clear that the illegitimacy and lack of confidence in democracy and the democratic government in Afghanistan were key elements in the reemergence of the Taliban.

³⁴ Murtazashvili, *The Collapse of Afghanistan*.

³⁵ Murtazashvili, *The Collapse of Afghanistan*.

³⁶ Downes, Alexander B, and Jonathan Monten. *Forced to Be Free? Why Foreign Imposed Regime Change Rarely Leads to Democratization*. (International Security, 2013).

VI. The Role of the Taliban

As the leader of the resistance that would eventually kick out the Western-backed democratic government, the Taliban's role is clearly crucial to understanding the overall failure of the US in Afghanistan. The Taliban's military offensive, but also their propaganda and politics played a major role in their ability to successfully remove the democratic government from power.

The haste with which the US withdrew from Afghanistan following the conclusion of its peace deal with the Taliban surprised many, the Afghan central government included. Having thought that the US was going to withdraw over a more protracted schedule, the Afghan army was unprepared to fully take over all military duties necessary to keep the Taliban at bay. However, the Taliban were not. The Taliban war machine had been honed during the 20 years of insurgency since they had been forced underground by Coalition forces.

Furthermore, the Taliban's financial means were substantially more refined than the central government's. Without the widespread corruption and embezzlement that riddled the democratically elected government, the Taliban was able to more efficiently fund its insurgency. With relatively few funds gained through taxation, extortion, and other locally-driven methods, the Taliban was able to defeat the trillions of dollars pumped into the central government. The harsh command structure with severe punishments for financial crimes, ideologically

driven commanders, and an autocratic structure allowed the Taliban to streamline its financial operations.³⁷

Likewise, another advantage the Taliban had over the central government dealt with the provision of basic services. In Taliban-controlled territory, schools ran as normal (and included girls up to 12 years old), disputes were generally fairly adjudicated by courts, and the Taliban ran a competent parallel government.³⁸ After beginning with a harsh-anti government services dogma, the Taliban learned the necessity to provide government-esque services, particularly as their territory grew in size and population. In this sense, they gained a huge advantage over the central government as they were able to provide these services better and more efficiently.

Even militarily, while it may seem that the Taliban, as a partial terrorist organisation, would be hugely unpopular amongst civilians, was actually not. In a hugely advantageous move, the Taliban established a commission to look into civilian casualties. Injured civilians or their relatives could make a complaint to the commission, which would then look into the details of the case and make a judgement. This commission later expanded to include a wide range of aspects of Taliban governance. In contrast, the central government was generally seen as distant and not very involved in the daily lives of most Afghans. The direct contact of Taliban-provided services linked civilians

³⁷ Cordesman, Anthony H. *The Reasons for the Collapse of Afghan Forces*. (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)).

³⁸ Smith, Scott S. *Service Delivery in Taliban Influenced Areas of Afghanistan*. (US Institute of Peace, 2020).

to the Taliban, and the resulting connection that developed made it harder for the Coalition to retake Taliban territory.³⁹

The Taliban also benefited from a severe underestimation by foreign powers and the Afghan central government. Whether this is due to the skill of the Taliban at hiding their forces and infrastructure or the mistakes of Coalition intelligence in properly analysing their intelligence is still under debate, but nonetheless the Taliban benefitted massively. They launched numerous military offensives that caught Western and Afghan forces entirely off guard, allowing them to seize land and the people and economic resources that came with that land before Coalition forces were able to come together and half the Taliban's advance. The element of surprise and the underestimation of their strength were invaluable to the Taliban's streak of military victories.⁴⁰

Additionally, the Taliban's propaganda machine enabled them to paint themselves as a better alternative to the central government. Coalition military mistakes such as civilian casualties, government corruption, and the lack of consistency of life under democracy were all used to hark back to the period of time when the Taliban was in power. Moreover, the Taliban also used word-of-mouth campaigns and social media to spread this message across the country. As previously mentioned, the Taliban also governed captured territory generally well, giving them a secondary

source of propaganda as people living in those areas would then spread the word that the Taliban was not so bad.

The Taliban were able to present a staunch military opposition, showed a masterful use of social media, and quite simply governed better than the central government. Hence, the ease with which they retook the country should not be overly surprising. Coalition and government forces, due to ignorance or a lack of intelligence, failed to properly compete with the Taliban on these fields and others, all of which played a role in the disenfranchisement of the general populace with the democratically elected government.

VII. The Role of Allies

While the US contributed the bulk of the funds, troops, and equipment used in Afghanistan, its coalition partners also played an important role, one which must be examined. In addition to the US and NATO, countries from across the rest of Europe, Asia, Oceania, and even the Middle East all aided the Coalition in various ways.

Coalition partners, often shirking away from participating in direct combat, preferred to support the central government through logistics and training assistance. However, this led to disagreements between members of the coalition, all of whom had different training styles. Conflicts emerged over the speed and duration of training, which units should receive what kind of training, and many more. Hence emerged an

³⁹ Smith, *Service Delivery in Taliban Influenced Areas of Afghanistan*.

⁴⁰ Cordesman, *The Reasons for the Collapse of Afghan Forces*.

inconsistent training program for local forces, depriving the Coalition of a key aspect of the defence of democracy.⁴¹

Further conflict came in the area of reconstruction assistance. Given the corruption rampant in the central government, the choice of some allied nations to form their own aid and development projects led to a logistical mess.⁴² Certain areas of Afghanistan were flooded with projects while others were left with little to no attention.⁴³ The lack of coordination on aid projects between nations led to inconsistent development, inhibiting the reconstruction of Afghanistan and the formation of a national identity.

The unstable security situation in Afghanistan also played a role; many nations had experience deploying their military in coordination with aid efforts during humanitarian crises, but doing so in an active conflict zone led to issues. Additionally, the transition from an active war footing, as was the case in the beginning of the conflict, to a more long-term developmental mindset. This switch had difficult domestic legal ramifications in some allied states, whose constitutions or laws required different structures, authorizations, and procedures for each kind of deployment.⁴⁴ Conflicting legislation prevented cooperation between countries and generally inhibited the functioning of the coalition.

Moreover, despite this constantly unstable security situation, Coalition members consistently refused to meet their very own defined troop requirements. The persistent understaffing of coalition soldiers, trainers, logistical staff, and others constrained the Coalition's progress towards achieving its own goals.⁴⁵ The lack of a uniform long-term policy also hindered progress and confused allies and Afghans alike. Simply, the coalition was too large and disorganised, with a constantly changing mandate and varying commitments by each member state that led to an inefficient fighting force and an even more inefficient attempt at development.

VIII. The Botched Withdrawal

Consummating the Coalition's embarrassing ordeal in Afghanistan was its exit; its chaos and general disorganisation represented so much of what was wrong with nation-building in Afghanistan. First and foremost was just how poorly the Afghan Defense Forces operated, falling to pieces rapidly. Key to highlight are the issues of ghost soldiers, as troop counts in Afghanistan were consistently overestimated by huge amounts, the lack of a capable domestic air force and the resulting reliance on Western air support, and a lack of motivation leading to huge desertions and surrenders.⁴⁶

Furthermore, the corruption widespread in the democratic government was exposed on a massive scale, as equipment was found not to exist, infrastructure found

⁴¹ Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*.

⁴² *Lessons from the Coalition: International Experiences from the Afghanistan Reconstruction*. (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, 2016).

⁴³ Murtazashvili, *The Collapse of Afghanistan*.

⁴⁴ *Lessons from the Coalition: International Experiences from the Afghanistan Reconstruction*.

⁴⁵ Yasa, Abdul Rahman. *The Case of Afghanistan*. (Journal of Strategic Security, 2020).

⁴⁶ Yasa, *The Case of Afghanistan*.

unconstructed, and a myriad of other ill effects. When, along with the withdrawal of troops, the Democratic government crumbled, deficiencies could be seen across a wide range of government activities, from aid to administration. Those who had the means to do so took what valuables they could and fled the country, hastening the Taliban's advance even more.⁴⁷

Yet, the Afghan central government was purportedly shocked by the US speeding up its withdrawal timeline, having thought they would continue to receive security and financial support for substantially more time. This feeling primarily derived from the idea that the US had sunk so many resources into Afghanistan that they effectively would never leave and was furthered by their exclusion from the Doha peace talks between the Taliban and the US, which left them out of the loop in some regards.⁴⁸ As such, they were unprepared to take over all defensive duties, a factor that is evident in how quickly the defences fell apart.

The Taliban also played an important role in the chaos that took place during the period before America's final withdrawal. Despite having agreed to pursue a peace deal with the central government, the Taliban never negotiated in good faith and ramped up violent attacks against government forces in another violation of the Doha Accords. Seizing on the advanced US withdrawal plan, the Taliban took advantage of unprepared Afghan forces and

rapidly swept the country, even faster than most Western countries had anticipated. As previously mentioned, the corrupt and ineffective Afghan army was no match for the Taliban war machine, well-trained through years of combat and well-funded through the Taliban's network of opium narcotics trafficking.⁴⁹

Moreover, the Taliban was already in control of much of the country, as part of the US military strategy in Afghanistan was to focus on maintaining control of cities and large population centres while sidelining the rural countryside. While this strategy was generally successful, it deprived the central government of infrastructure and resources while allowing the Taliban to profit from a large amount of territory that was essentially ceded to it without a fight.⁵⁰ The below figure represents just how widespread the Taliban's control was, allowing it to easily wipe away the central government from the few areas it still had control over.

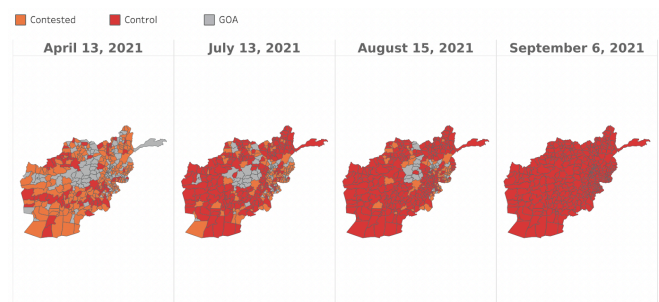


Fig.2: Taliban vs. Government Control of the Districts of Afghanistan After the American Withdrawal.
Source: FDD's Long War Journal, 2017.

⁴⁷ Cordesman, 'Peace' as the Vietnamization of a U.S. Withdrawal?

⁴⁸ Sopko, *The Factors Leading to the Collapse of the Afghan Government and Its Security Forces*.

⁴⁹ Cordesman, *The Reasons for the Collapse of Afghan Forces*.

⁵⁰ Cordesman, *The Reasons for the Collapse of Afghan Forces*.

While primarily, the disastrous withdrawal of Coalition forces from Afghanistan was due to military causes, the underlying factors reflect the wide range of issues faced in Afghanistan that were not overcome. Corruption, military weaknesses, misguided strategy, and time all played a role in the ensuing crisis that was the withdrawal.

IX. Lessons from Afghanistan

Despite an overall failure in the Western World's nation-building efforts in Afghanistan, there is much that can be learnt from their errors.

Was the US ever going to have built a functioning state in Afghanistan? Its perpetual focus on constant military action belies a goal that state-building in Afghanistan was primarily a military mission and not a political one. Were the US to have negotiated a stalemate in the early years of the war when the Taliban was truly in danger of getting wiped out, it is possible that could have opened the door for a period of peace necessary for true state-building to occur. After all, constant violence is hardly the prime condition under which to construct a democratic society from the ground up. Furthermore, the US and its allies had a great deal of leverage at that time, with domestic support for their activities in Afghanistan still strong, a mostly cohesive set of local allies, and success on the battlefield. As such, the US was in a prime position to negotiate a peaceful end to the conflict.⁵¹ Yet, the idea in the heads of many American military and political leaders was the complete destruction of the Taliban, leading to the decline

of any peace proposal at that time.⁵² In contrast, the final peace settlement negotiated by the Trump administration was done at a time when the US had close to no leverage at all, henceforth resulting in a peace deal with almost no concessions on the part of the Taliban, something that played a key role in the chaotic withdrawal. The only peace the US military could envision was a complete and total military victory, something unrealistic and also a contributing factor in the rather peaceless withdrawal.

Likewise, the constant shifting of goals in order to promote continuous military buildup led to confusion amongst allies and the lack of a worthy long-term strategy. The US' goal in Afghanistan varied greatly during the span of its involvement in the nation; beginning with the elimination of Al-Qaeda and revenge for the 9/11 attacks, then moving on to the destruction of the Taliban, followed by a new focus on corrupt warlords and other local leaders, before finally on to state building. This never-ending search for new enemies so that military involvement could be justified led to countless unnecessary civilian and soldier casualties and only served to complicate the state-building process.⁵³ Moreover, changing success metrics also led to the incorrect sentiment that the central government could survive without US support. An Afghan military built up in the style as the American one failed to adapt to the different conditions, with equipment and tactics not suited for Afghanistan. Yet, military leaders and policymakers

⁵¹ Bateman, Kate. *Learning from Failed Peace Efforts in Afghanistan*. (United States Institute of Peace, 2023).

⁵² Robinson, Linda. *Our Biggest Errors in Afghanistan and What We Should Learn from Them*. (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023).

⁵³ *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*.

refused to believe the truth and made only minimal changes.⁵⁴

It is telling that the most effective Afghan security force was the Auxiliary Police, a paramilitary group formed to fill the gaps left by the failures of the Army and National Police. Despite little training and equipment, the Auxiliary Police soon became the preferred local partner for US and Coalition forces. Notwithstanding the fact that these units had close to no loyalty to the central government, instead following the orders of local tribal leaders and warlords, their efficiency could not be denied. In contrast to the Army and Police, the Auxiliary Police were paid well and on a regular basis, meaning that desertion was almost nonexistent, and furthermore prevented the militiamen from secretly switching sides and turning on their Western counterparts. Moreover, the Auxiliary Police had a rigid command structure, which would punish ineffective leaders and promote promising cadets. The increased control given to local leaders created a much more cohesive fighting force and one the Coalition forces would actually trust by their side on the battlefield.⁵⁵

Furthermore, despite the Coalition's attempts to build a strong democratic government in Kabul, they also continued working with local leaders and warlords, delegitimizing the central government and putting power in the hands of these local leaders, not Kabul. While some of this was out of necessity, as the central government was often too corrupt to get much done, the failure of the

Coalition to fully choose one or the other led to confusion, both among Coalition members and Afghans. Some power was kept mainly in the hands of local leaders, and other responsibilities were given to the central government, inhibiting the central government from being the ultimate authority in the land but also preventing local leaders from effectively fully helping the coalition.⁵⁶ Perhaps nothing better represents the failure of the US to create a reliable and legitimate government in Kabul than Afghan President Ghani fleeing to Uzbekistan despite his promise to fight to the death.

Key to the Coalition's goals in Afghanistan, and in the end, key to its failures too, was aid and development. There was simply not enough coordination of aid between Coalition states and other donor organisations, leading to a lopsided distribution and general ineffectiveness of aid. While attempts were made to rectify this issue, such as the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board, which did help increase the amount of information donors knew about other donors, there were simply too many individual parties for there to be proper negotiations.⁵⁷ Hence, it is possible that consolidating aid through a single channel could have been more effective in this regard. Yet, having done so would have also run the risk of alienating certain donor countries and may also have led to corruption. Moreover, the US and its allies created unrealistic schedules, choosing figures and timeframes that were politically

⁵⁴ Bateman, *Learning from Failed Peace Efforts in Afghanistan*.

⁵⁵ Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*.

⁵⁶ Cordesman, Anthony H, and Grace Hwang. *Learning the Right Lessons from the Afghan War*. (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2021)

⁵⁷ *Lessons from the Coalition: International Experiences from the Afghanistan Reconstruction*.

beneficial but incredibly unworkable. These schedules lead to corruption, as they prioritised huge amounts of short-term spending, while vastly underachieving their goals.⁵⁸

Despite all these funds being pumped into the country, monitoring programs and audits were rare. Rampant corruption went either ignored or undiscovered, and oftentimes, coalition leaders had little idea about the effectiveness of their programs. The lack of reporting and information led to ill-guided policies and decisions, as policymakers based their ideas off of incorrect knowledge. As such, billions of dollars were wasted on unnecessary projects that did not help American interests in Afghanistan, but instead either looked politically beneficial or descended from the deception of politicians.⁵⁹ The introduction of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction helped, cutting billions of dollars in costs, finding corrupt programs and officials and prosecuting them, but it was unable to consistently cover all aspects of the coalition's involvement in Afghanistan.⁶⁰

While the US' failed nation-building experiment in Afghanistan will endure as one of its most embarrassing actions for some time, it will hopefully also serve as a wake-up call for a major restructuring of aspects of American foreign and military policy. It is clear that money and guns are not the way to build a sustainable democracy,

it needs people, selfless leaders, and most importantly, confidence. Yet, Afghanistan's failed democratic experiment had none of those things.

However, one must also remember the price of these lessons; the hundreds of thousands of Afghan civilians and troops that lost their lives during the course of the conflict. One of the greatest mistakes the Coalition made was dehumanising the conflict. So many military leaders and policymakers failed to understand the reality in Afghanistan, making decisions from their plushy offices in the Capitol or Pentagon. Therein lies what may well be the largest lesson; the US failed to understand Afghanistan, its people, society, and culture, and attempted to push an unwelcome change through brute force. It is a strategy that has now been tried and failed in several cases and ought to be entirely rethought.

In the end, despite all the factors that influenced the US' failure in Afghanistan, at the core it was people that drove its successes and its failures. People who joined the Taliban or Al-Qaeda, people who were not convinced by the corrupt democracy, people who fled to warlords for protection, and people who the US failed to win over.

⁵⁸ *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction.*

⁵⁹ Robinson, *Our Biggest Errors in Afghanistan and What We Should Learn from Them.*

⁶⁰ *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction.*

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