

CSIS

CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

EMERITUS CHAIR  
IN STRATEGY

# The Key Lessons of America's Recent Wars

*Failing or Losing in Grand Strategic Terms*

By Anthony H. Cordesman

June 13, 2023

Please provide comments to [acordesman@gmail.com](mailto:acordesman@gmail.com)

## **The Key Lessons of America's Recent Wars: Failing or Losing in Grand Strategic Terms**

**Anthony H. Cordesman**

America's defeat in Afghanistan has launched another round of official studies of the lessons of war. Such efforts have had value in the past by examining the military lessons of a given war and some of the major political decisions and programs that shaped its course. At the same time, most such efforts have understated or ignored critical failures in conducting the broader course of the war and in moving to a successful and stable peace. They have ignored U.S. failures to set meaningful grand strategic goals for engaging in a given war to properly evaluate the value of sustaining America's role in combat, and to terminate the war in ways that could credibly result in lasting and meaningful peace.

This analysis examines each of America's grand strategic failures in warfighting since 1945 and its failures to learn the right lessons from these wars. It indicates that other failures included a common tendency to define strategy in terms of broad goals rather than as a practical process that justified such goals, created practical plans to achieve them, and allocated the needed resources with proper management and honest and objective measurements of their effectiveness.

It shows that the United States failed to adequately perform strategic triage in assessing the costs and risks of engaging in combat and sustaining this role over time. The United States often began what became a major military engagement by using U.S. forces in advisory roles or low levels of combat. It then escalated to full-scale warfare without properly assessing the costs and risks of escalating U.S. involvement and the probability of ending a conflict with a lasting grand strategic victory.

It also shows that the United States failed to properly address the risks created by failed host-country governance, a lack of effective host-country political leadership and unity, and deep divisions that existed at an ethnic, tribal, and religious level. It underestimated the problems in creating effective host country forces as well as creating an effective rule of law and local security. It treated corruption and authoritarian self-interest as secondary problems rather than as major challenges to success. In the cases of Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, it also attempted to create the shell of a democratic government as a potential solution to nation-building problems regardless of real-world political divisions, inexperienced leaders, and weak overall structure of governance.

## Contents

Winning Tactically While Losing or Only Getting a Stalemate in Grand Strategic Terms .....	3
From Quasi-Intervention in the Chinese Civil War to Seeing China as America's Primary Strategic Threat .....	4
U.S. Intervention in the Korean War: Snatching Stalemate from the Jaws of Victory .....	6
U.S. Intervention in Vietnam: Winning the Fighting, Losing the War.....	9
The U.S. Invasion of Cuba and the Bay of Pigs: Casting Pearls before Swine .....	12
Iran and Kuwait: Winning in Kuwait and Four Wars Worth of Grand Strategic Failures in Iraq	13
Figure 1: Estimate of U.S. Troop Levels in Iraq: 2003 Invasion, War against Sunni Extremists, and War against ISIL – Part One: FY 2001-FY 2017 .....	18
Figure 1: Estimate of U.S. Troop Levels in Iraq: 2003 Invasion, War against Sunni Extremists, and War against ISIL – Part Two: FY 2007-FY 2020.....	19
Figure 2: Boom and Bust Funding, in the U.S. Military and Civil Aid Effort in Iraq.....	20
Two Decades of Failure in Afghanistan .....	21
Figure 3: The Afghan Alps: Boom and Bust, in U.S. Armed Forces and Contractor Personnel in Afghanistan: FY 2007-FY 2020 .....	26
Figure 4: The Afghan Alps: Massive Instability, Sudden Booms and Busts, and Cumulative Turbulence in Major Military and Civil Funding – Part One .....	27
Figure 4: The Afghan Alps: Massive Instability, Sudden Booms and Busts, and Cumulative Turbulence in Major Military and Civil Funding – Part Two .....	28
Learning the Real Lessons of War.....	29
Setting Clear Grand Strategic Objectives Focused on Creating a Stable Post War Outcome Worth the Cost and Risks of the War.....	30
Exercising Strategic Triage.....	31
Giving the Civil Side of Nation-Building the Same Grand Strategic Importance as Warfighting	33
Rethinking the Real-World Ability to Build Effective Host Country Forces.....	35
Putting the Lessons of Warfighting in the Right Grand Strategic Context.....	38
Endnotes.....	40

## **Winning Tactically While Losing or Only Getting a Stalemate in Grand Strategic Terms**

This does not mean that the United States has not had major grand strategic successes despite such failures in actual warfighting. The United States has had grand strategic successes in creating strong alliances and by working with other developed democracies in Europe and Asia. It had major successes in partnering with developing states that had strong and effective governments, and it has played a major role in giving them security from outside threats by giving them more modern and effective military and internal security forces and by helping them develop.

More generally, the United States has scored grand strategic successes by creating effective levels of nuclear and conventional deterrence that shield both the United States and its allies. It has also successfully intervened by providing effective civil and military aid in many contingencies that did not involve the United States in serious combat. It has recently shown in the case of Ukraine that it can play a critical role in defending a nation from a major invasion by Russia and that it can work with partner states to check the rising threat from China.

*But*, the United States failed to achieve lasting grand strategic success by creating a lasting stable and favorable outcome in any of its major wars since 1945. It lost at least two of its wars in purely military terms, and four in grand strategic terms. It failed to create a favorable grand strategic outcome in China, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and after invading Iraq in 2003, and has yet to secure a stable favorable grand strategic outcome from the wars in Iraq and Syria that have followed.

In three key cases—Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq from 2003 onwards—the United States escalated to the equivalent of war almost by accident. It never set meaningful and achievable grand strategic goals and failed to create stable and progressive states. Ironically, the United States benefited in grand strategic terms from losing the war in Vietnam because a unified Vietnam has become a regional counterbalance to China.

Iraq may yet develop into an effective state despite its divisions and uncertain level of governance, although it will do so more despite U.S. intervention than because of it. As for Afghanistan, U.S. grand strategic failures seem likely to leave a legacy of lasting internal suffering, but Afghanistan never had more than marginal grand strategic importance to the United States.

In the case of South Korea, the United States did force a stalemate on China and North Korea, but it only “won” in grand strategic terms largely because the South Korean government succeeded in achieving effective governance, development, and more democratic government years after the war.

## **From Quasi-Intervention in the Chinese Civil War to Seeing China as America's Primary Strategic Threat**

The U.S. intervention in China during World War II, and in the conflict between Chiang Kai Shek and Mao's communists that followed, makes an interesting contrast to America's role in the wars that followed. On the one hand, it gave the U.S. airbases it could use to bomb Japanese targets and helped tie down nearly one million Japanese troops in China. On the other hand, it served as a clear warning about the difficulties in nation-building, and it failed to achieve the grand strategic goal of limiting Russian influence in China and creating a Chinese government and military forces that could prevent a Chinese communist takeover.

The U.S. effort to support Chiang Kai Shek took several different forms from the late 1930s onwards to the present. It never involved a major U.S. combat role, but it was a failure that has had the most lasting grand strategic impact, and its history is a useful preface to America's role in direct conflict from the Korean to Afghan wars.

The United States first politically intervened in China by trying to prevent, and then limit, a Japanese invasion during the 1920s and 1930s. It then sent U.S. land and air forces to fight in China to support Chiang Kai Shek against Japan once the United States entered World War II. President Roosevelt did so in part because he saw Chiang, and his Kuomintang (KMT) army, as a potential future counterpoint to Russian and Chinese communist control over China.

For reasons that General Stilwell, the U.S. theater commander in China made all too clear after the war, this U.S. intervention in support of Chiang and the KMT during World War II had only marginal success. Chiang focused on building up his military forces in Western China to defeat Mao and his communists once World War II ended rather than on fighting the Japanese. He resisted military reforms that would have allowed him to retrain his forces to carry out effective offensives and made little progress in nation-building and winning popular support. As a result, it was Mao's forces that did most of the fighting against the Japanese and won support among the Chinese people.<sup>1</sup>

The United States did not actively fight in the war between Chiang Kai Shek's KMT and Mao's communist forces that began as World War II ended. General Marshall did refuse a request from General Wedemeyer to send U.S. Army divisions to China after Wedemeyer became chief of staff to Chiang in 1944–1946, and Wedemeyer's 1947 report calling for direct U.S. military support to Chiang was suppressed for two years.<sup>2</sup>

The United States did, however, continue some efforts to support, arm, and train Chiang's forces after a full-scale civil war began in 1946 between Chiang's KMT and Mao's Communists.<sup>3</sup> This effort had only a marginal effect. Chiang failed to unite his country around him from 1946 onwards and failed to succeed in virtually every key aspect of nation-building. Corruption, failed governance, and the military failures of the KMT then led to a full-scale Communist victory in 1949.

In short, the U.S. intervention in China after Japan's surrender differed sharply from the U.S. intervention in Vietnam and Afghanistan. The United States never made the survival of Chiang's regime a major grand strategic objective or committed significant forces to combat in support of the KMT. It had also concluded during World War II that it could not turn the KMT regime into a popular or effective government or find ways to make KMT military forces effective.

The United States also never developed a consistent set of strategic objectives to deal with China after Chiang's defeat and retreat to Taiwan in 1949. The Communist victory over Chiang and the KMT was so decisive in grand strategic terms that it initially led President Truman to state that the United States would not help to defend Taiwan after Chiang Kai Shek lost the islands of Hainan, Wanshan, and Zhoushan.

It was only after it became clear that Communist China would not go on to invade Taiwan that the United States began to provide major security assistance to Chiang in Taiwan. This helped Taiwan survive, but the new government in Taiwan only transitioned from a one-party state under Chiang to a full democracy in the 1980s and 1990s, and it did so largely on its own. Like South Korea, Taiwan developed itself into a modern government and economy with only moderate U.S. economic aid.

The United States failed to establish an effective grand strategy for dealing with the Communist regime on the mainland and fought a major war against China in Korea from 1950 to 1953. The United States treated China as a major regional threat well into the 1960s, but then went on to establish good relations after the Chinese Communist government had largely split with Russia. This helped lead to President Nixon's visit to China in February 1972, and the "opening" of U.S. relations with China.

The United States then supported a two-China policy in dealing with Communist China from the time of Nixon's "opening" to the rise of Xi after 2012. This policy allowed the Chinese economy and military to grow in ways that helped China to transform into a superpower, while the collapse of the former Soviet Union in the 1970s led to a revival of close Chinese and Russian relations. As a result, China's civil and military strength expanded to the point where U.S. strategy came to see China as the most important single civil and military global challenge to its security, while China has returned to close strategic ties to Russia.

It is unclear that the United States could have shaped a grand strategy in dealing with China from the late 1930s to the present that would have allowed it to shape a more effective grand strategy, but it is also clear that the United States reacted largely to events and did so relatively slowly and inconsistently. It is equally clear that there is a serious risk that the United States and China could now go to war over Taiwan some 70 years after its first confrontation with Communist China over Taiwan, and it has no clear grand strategy for conducting war with China that could result in a successful or stable peace. At least in the near to mid-term, China also seems likely to strengthen its relations with Russia and expand its nuclear forces to the point where it will pose a massive countervalue threat to the United States.

## **U.S. Intervention in the Korean War: Snatching Stalemate from the Jaws of Victory**

The Korean War was the first major U.S. involvement in combat after World War II and is a much clearer example of America's postwar strategic failures. Korea had been occupied by Japan since 1910. After the Japanese defeat, the United States and the Soviet Union split the country into two zones at the 38th parallel under a U.S.–Soviet Union Joint Commission with a five-year mandate. Korea became the equivalent of two countries as U.S. and Soviet tensions increased with the beginning of the Cold War: a communist north whose Korean leader was Kim Il-sung, and a U.S. supported South under a “U.S. Military Government” whose Korean leader was Rhee Syngman.

Both Koreas held elections in 1948, once it became clear that the Joint Commission could not agree on Korea's future. The election in the South was a general election but rigged by Rhee, who became the equivalent of an authoritarian leader. The North held a parliamentary election some months later, which made Kim Il-sung its supreme leader with the support of Stalin and China. Both Rhee and Kim Il-sung claimed to be the government of the entire country and attempted to create military forces that could defend their section of Korea and potentially occupy the other.

The Soviet Union then withdrew its troops, and the United States followed a year later in 1949. The United States badly misread the overall grand strategic situation when it did so. The United States did engage in some nation-building and support to South Korean forces, but it did little to create a force that could be an effective defense and deterrent at a time when the Cold War had clearly begun and when U.S. support for the KMT had made Mao's China increasingly hostile.

The United States did seem to have detected the fact that Kim Il-sung repeatedly sought Stalin's permission to invade the South, or the growing strength of North Korean forces—many of which had supported Mao's forces during the fighting in China. It is unclear, however, that the United States understood the seriousness of the fact that China declared the United States was its major strategic threat and had deployed joint Chinese-Korean divisions that mixed forces from both Communist China and Korea into North Korea in 1949.<sup>4</sup>

The United States failed to properly assess the rapidly growing North Korean military threat and the weaknesses and growing inferiority of the South's forces despite the success of a growing North Korean-sponsored insurgency and the fact that there were Chinese generals, and two Chinese-Korean divisions, and some 50,000 to 70,000 Chinese troops deployed in North Korea by 1949. The U.S. commander of the Korean Military Assistance Group stated that a North Korean invasion would only give South Korean Forces “target practice,” and the CIA dismissed North Korean deployments south and clashes at the demilitarized zone as defensive measures.<sup>5</sup> Equally important, the United States failed to develop a functional plan to project U.S. forces to support South Korea in an emergency.

In any case, Stalin then gave Kim Il-sung permission (or orders) to invade the South and start the Korean War on June 25, 1950—although it is China that may have been the major factor in deciding the timing of the invasion. Fortunately for the United States, this timing occurred when the Soviet Union walked out of the United Nations because the United Nations had recognized the KMT in Taiwan as the legitimate government of China. America's grand strategic mistakes might have been far more serious if the Security Council had not denounced the invasion and

authorized the creation of a UN Council and provided diplomatic and military support. Although the United States eventually provided 90 percent of the foreign forces that fought in support of the South, the United States benefited immensely from internal political and international support.

The war lasted from June 25, 1950, to July 27, 1953, and North Korea initially scored major gains. The lack of U.S. prewar planning and a somewhat chaotic effort to rush U.S. forces into the South in the form of unready and poorly armed units like Task Force Smith meant U.S. intervention began badly and provided a critical warning as to the strategic importance of maintaining deterrent U.S. forces in place, being able to quickly deploy effective U.S. power projection capabilities and preserving U.S. military readiness.

At the start of U.S. intervention, it had to rush in low-capability U.S. combat forces like Task Force Smith, and the United States could not keep North Korea from driving U.S. and South Korean forces into a small area called the Pusan Perimeter and coming close to seizing the South.<sup>6</sup> The United States did, however, proceed to rapidly sufficient additional forces to allow it to counterattack. It built up a major U.S. military presence and carried out a major amphibious invasion in Incheon in September 1950 that isolated North Korean forces and cut their supply lines. As a result, U.S., allied, and South Korean forces inflicted major defeats on North Korean forces and drove North across the 38th parallel and toward the Yalu River and border with China.

At this point, however, the United States made another grand strategic mistake. It underestimated the threat posed by a major Chinese military intervention in the war despite significant intelligence warnings that this was a serious threat.<sup>7</sup> As a result, General MacArthur, the U.S. commander, advanced steadily into the North across the 38th parallel toward China beginning in October 1950. As a result, China sent major Chinese combat forces into combat beginning on October 19.

This Chinese intervention did not lead to a U.S., allied, South Korean defeat, but it did lead to serious fighting that lost the gains that U.S. and allied forces had made in North Korea. The result was a brutal two-year war of attrition, which only ended as an armistice in July 1953 after both sides concluded they could not defeat the other.

This experience illustrates other grand strategic problems in the way the United States has approached its post-World War II conflicts. First, the United States focused on battles and warfighting and did not properly address the prospects it could “win” a lasting victory. Although some senior officers and civilian policymakers did press for an armistice once the North Korean and Chinese offensive was halted in 1950, the United States was slow to accept the fact that it could not actually “win” the war of attrition that followed.

As the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan illustrated, the United States had serious problems in estimating its real-world prospects for favorable conflict termination. Rhee Syngman, and various communist leaders also failed to set realistic goals for terminating the conflict, but the United States failed to push hard for a viable settlement even though it began negotiations as early as mid-December 1950. It was only after President-elect Eisenhower went to Korea in December 1952 and concluded that “We could not stand forever on a static front and continue to accept casualties without visible results . . . Small attacks on small hills would not end this war” that the United States truly sought a credible armistice. This armistice was signed on July 27, 1953, and left Korea divided near the 38th parallel.<sup>8</sup>

Second, the United States played a comparatively marginal postwar role in helping South Korea achieve the kind of stable peace and stability that is the true measure of grand strategic victory. The United States did continue to train and equip South Korean forces in the years following the armistice, but it did not make serious attempts at nation-building. It did not create a representative or democratic government, push for major improvements in governance, or attempt a major economic development effort.

South Korea did receive U.S. economic aid, but South Korea largely developed itself. It took years to convert to an effective democracy and did so through its own initiative and only became a real democracy in 1993. It was South Korean efforts that made South Korea a developed nation, gave it an effective popular government, and improved South Korean force to the point where South Korea is now a critical strategic partner and the equivalent of an American grand strategic success. This process took three decades after the armistice, and it is important to note that agreeing to a stalemate was not a grand strategic victory. North Korea remains a major conventional threat to South Korea, the United States, and Asian partners like Japan. It is a growing nuclear power and is actively developing ICBMs that will allow its nuclear forces to strike the United States.

## **U.S. Intervention in Vietnam: Winning the Fighting, Losing the War**

In retrospect, American grand strategy in the Vietnam War was somewhat similar to the strategy of a gambler who continues to double his bets and is finally lucky enough to walk away from the table with almost as much money as when he began. The United States won the war in warfighting terms but never succeeded in creating an effective effort in nation-building. It then lost a “peace” it negotiated largely to allow it to withdraw from Vietnam and saw both sides continue the war after U.S. forces departed. It did not create effective local military forces that could stand on their own, although it made a massive effort to do so, and found—probably to the surprise of both sides—that its enemy in the fighting has come to be an asset in dealing with China.

The United States began its escalation into a major war in Vietnam by providing advisory aid to France when it was still attempting to preserve a post-colonial role in the south of Vietnam but continued play a growing role in the fighting once France left Vietnam following its defeat in Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The result was that the United States was the major foreign power involved in the war from November 1, 1955, to the war's end on April 30, 1975—a period almost exactly as long as the war in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup>

The United States then backed the government of Ngo Dinh Diem, Diem became an appointed South Vietnamese prime minister in 1954, shortly before the Geneva Convention partitioned Vietnam into a communist north and an independent south at its 17th parallel. He then rigged a national referendum to make himself president in 1955.

A major communist insurgency began in the south in 1957, and the United States then gradually escalated its provision of “advisors” to into full-scale participation in a major conflict from 1961 onwards. It did so with the vague strategic rationale that a communist victory would lead other Southeast Asian states to “fall like dominoes” and become communist or be dominated by communist states. The United States did so without properly examining the effectiveness and integrity of the South Vietnamese government, and the deep internal divisions in South Vietnam like those between its Catholic “mandarin” class and its Buddhists. The result was that the United States eventually split with Diem as he lost the support of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The CIA supported the South senior generals in a coup that overthrew Diem on November 1, 1963, and killed Diem and his brother the next day.

The United States then backed a series of military juntas led by General Duong Van Minh, who led the coup against Diem, and then General Nguyen Khanh, General Nguyen Van Thieu, and finally Minh. The leadership of South Vietnam became a kind of revolving door struggle for the presidency between key commanders, and one that did nothing to promote its best commanders and create an honest and effective government. (Ironically, Minh came back into power as a president “elected” by the legislature on April 28, 1975—two days before the fall of Saigon to the Communists.)

The United States escalated its intervention to a major war without setting realistic grand strategic objectives. U.S. force levels rose from under a thousand advisory troops in 1959, before President John F. Kennedy took office, to 23,000 by 1964. Following a grossly exaggerated set of U.S. reports on the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964—one where the United States greatly exaggerated the role of the North in attacking U.S. ships—the Congress passed a

resolution that allow President Johnson to escalate without declaring war, and the United States deployed major combat units for the first time, and rapidly escalated to 184,000 soldiers.<sup>10</sup>

By late 1966, the United States had more than 300,000 soldiers in Vietnam. It was conducting a major air campaign in Vietnam, intervening in neighboring states, and draining its war reserves in NATO to support the Vietnam War. This allowed the United States to build up an effective mix of U.S. forces and some elite U.S.-backed Vietnamese units over time. As it later became clear from the Pentagon Papers, however, the U.S. involvement in combat and operations in Cambodia and Laos escalated in ways that were not reported to Congress, and the U.S. command issues exaggerated reports of both military success and success in building the Armed of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). In the process, official unclassified reporting became steadily less honest and set the pattern for the kind “liar’s contest” the United States repeated in Iraq after 2003 and in its war in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup>

These issues came to a head when North Vietnam triggered a massive Tet offensive against U.S. and ARVN forces in 1968. The U.S. and ARVN forces defeated this offensive, but this military victory against the Tet offensive only came after the offensive showed that the previous official reporting on the war had grossly exaggerated U.S. and ARVN success. Combined with another North Vietnamese Easter Offensive in 1972, a steadily more unpopular U.S. reliance on the draft, rising war costs and casualties, and continued exaggerated U.S. official reports of success, the war became so unpopular in the United States that the administration and U.S. Congress came under sharply growing domestic political pressure to withdraw.

The Nixon administration reacted by stepping up the U.S. bombing campaign and attacking civilian target in the North, pulling U.S. combat troops back from major combat areas and substituting the ARVN, putting more emphasis on “Vietnamization” and building up South Vietnamese forces, and putting pressure on the Soviet Union. North Vietnam faced its own problems because of the failure of the Tet offensive, its casualties, and the U.S. bombing campaign. The end result was a stalemate somewhat similar to what happened in Korea with the difference that the United States had not defeated the enemy and the both the South Vietnamese forces and government were not capable of standing on their own.

It seems likely that the top leadership of the Nixon administration clearly knew the risk that the South Vietnamese government might not survive, but it signed a highly political Paris Peace Accords with North Vietnam that set noble goals for a peace that there was little prospect of achieving and that did set a very firm goal for a total departure of U.S. forces. The United States signed this agreement on January 27, 1973. It had already halted all combat operations on January 15, and all U.S. forces left the South within 60 days of the signing of the Paris Accord.

In practice, the U.S. departure from Vietnam was somewhat similar to the grand strategic failures that the United States repeated in its peace efforts in the Afghanistan and in its partial withdrawals from combat after its wars in Iraq from 2003 onwards. The United States left for internal political reasons without having the full support of the South Vietnamese government in the decisionmaking process. The United States left before it created conditions that offered a high probability of lasting South Vietnamese stability and success and failed to properly assess the probable consequences of its actions.

Accordingly, it is scarcely surprising that fighting between the North and South resumed shortly after the United States departed, or that North Vietnam responded by covertly invading the South in 1975—after it was clear from aid debates in Congress that the United States was unlikely to

come to the South's aid. It is worth noting that the North did still plan for up to two years of additional warfare in doing so, but that South Vietnam's government and forces collapsed in only two months after the North Vietnamese offensive began.

Like the war in Afghanistan, the war in Vietnam demonstrated that effective nation-building and creating effective host country military capabilities that the country can sustain without major U.S. combat and material support are critical aspects of grand strategy in such wars and can be more important than military success and victories in achieving a lasting result. The lack of U.S. realism in nation-building and its failure to create an ARVN that could sustain itself in combat without the support of U.S. forces also set a precedent that bears striking resemblances to the U.S. efforts to develop host country forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup>

More broadly, the United States failed to perform adequate strategic triage in setting its objectives, in reassessing its strategic priorities once it was involved in serious combat, and in seeking a peace. Ironically, the United States engaged in a war whose grand strategic rationale was heavily based on a "domino theory" that a North Vietnamese victory could create a major new Chinese and communist dominated bloc in Asia.

In practice, it was U.S. military interference in Cambodia and Laos that came close to turning them into dominoes. As for North Vietnam, the domino eventually fell in favor of the United States in spite of its defeat. China invaded a united Vietnam in January 1979 after the North drove Pol Pot out of power in Cambodia. While Vietnam scarcely became U.S. strategic partner, the United States and Vietnam now share a common desire to contain China, and America's grand strategic defeat has become a limited grand strategic success.

## **The U.S. Invasion of Cuba and the Bay of Pigs: Casting Pearls before Swine**

The U.S. invasion of Cuba may or may not belong in this list of wars. The United States did not deploy U.S. combat forces with Brigade 2506, the 1,500-man invasion force of Cuban exiles that landed in the Bay of Pigs on April 17, 1961, and was defeated by Castro's forces by April 17.

It is worth noting, however, that the launch of this combat operation was perhaps the worst single U.S. assessment of the vulnerability of a threat state after World War II, the least credible effort at assessing risk and performing strategic triage, the least credible case of shaping an effective allied force, and the least credible military action in terms of producing a probable favorable grand strategic result. It also is important to note that it helped trigger the far more serious Cuban missile crisis from October 16 to October 29, 1962.

## **Iran and Kuwait: Winning in Kuwait and Four Wars Worth of Grand Strategic Failures in Iraq**

America has played a role in four different wars in Iraq since 1980, and the U.S. military has played a serious role in combat against the Iraqi forces and factions in three of them. These wars were very different in character, but after 2003, the U.S. role played a major role in combat in Iraq and did so in ways that again involved grand strategic failures and ones that were similar in key respects to those in Vietnam and Afghanistan.

The first conflict was U.S. political and diplomatic involvement in the Iran-Iraq War from 1980–1988. The United States never played a significant role in the fighting in this war, or efforts to build Iraq forces, but did set clear diplomatic goals that it largely achieved. A war between an Iraq under Saddam Hussein and an Iran under Khomeini was a case where the best way the United States could win in grand strategic terms was to ensure that neither side would win. While Iraq initially dominated Iran, it suffered serious defeats as Iran mobilized and create forces loyal its new Supreme Leader.

While the United States never explicitly said so, its grand strategic objective in this conflict was to ensure that neither side scored a decisive victory over the other and that the war would lead to a stalemate that ended the fighting and do without a critical disruption of the overall flow of petroleum exports out of the Gulf or seriously threatening America's strategic partners in the Arab Gulf.

By 1984, this meant the U.S. objective was to ensure the survival of Iraq, since Iran come to dominate the war after late 1984. Iraqi forces were then rebuilt largely with Russia and European support, and scored major victories in 1987 and 1988, but could not defeat and occupy Iran. As a result, the war of attrition between the two countries ended with their acceptance of a ceasefire on status quo ante bellum terms when they accepted UN security Council Resolution 598 on July 20, 1988.

The first actual war that involved major U.S. combat against Iraqi forces occurred two years later after Saddam Hussein has successfully sent Iraqi forces to invade Kuwait on August 2, 1990. He did so both to eliminate the need to repay the wartime debts to Kuwait that Iraq had incurred in fighting the Iran-Iraq War, and to annex Kuwait's territory and oil wealth.

In response The United States and Saudi Arabia formed a broad coalition first launched a major strategic and tactical air offensive against key target in Iraq and Kuwait and then launched a major land offensive against a weakened set of Iraqi forces in Kuwait that collapsed and withdrew in a matter of days. As a result, the United States achieved its immediate grand strategic objective. The U.S., Arab, and European coalition that decisively defeated Iraqi military forces in Kuwait in a major set of air and air-land battles that lasted from January 17 to February 28 in 1991 and then came to occupy some limited positions in Southern Iraq.

Once again, however, the United States went to war with no clear grand strategic objective for defeating its enemy in way that could produce a stable and successful outcome. The United States was also unprepared for the scale and success of the rapid victory of Coalition land and air forces. It had not looked beyond planning to fight its battles to liberate Kuwait to determine how or whether it could create a successful postwar outcome of the war. The United States did not set meaningful goals for creating a peaceful Iraq and did almost nothing to try to create a stable Iraqi state after the fighting ceased. The United States also took the lead in placing Iraq under serious

UN sanctions while leaving it under the rule of Saddam Hussein, almost ensuring a high degree of internal unrest and added repression.

The only major positive internal change that occurred inside Iraq as a result of the war to liberate Kuwait was that the United States, United Kingdom, and France established a no-fly zone over northern Iraq in April 1991, called Operation Provide Comfort (OPC). This gave the Kurdish population in the north protection from Saddam's forces and led to emergence of a "Kurdistan" but it also meant continuing military tension within Iraq and the enforcement of a "no fly" and U.S. military capability to intervene in Iraq.

The United States and Britain did, however, demonstrated the power of deterrence versus warfighting when Saddam Hussein moved two divisions, and other forces, back toward Kuwait in ways that could threaten another military effort. While sources argue over whether Saddam intended another invasion, these U.S. and Britain deployments made it immediately clear that any such action would lead to another war and deterred any action Saddam may have planned.<sup>13</sup>

British aircraft flying over Iraq detected Iraqi armor moving south toward the Kuwait border on October 4, 1994. U.S. and British intelligence then found two Iraqi Republican Guard Divisions were moving south to join the Iraqi III Corps near Basra. U.S. and British intelligence concluded that Iraq would soon be able to launch a five-division attack on Kuwait from the Basra area, although it was not clear whether Iraq intended to invade or make a show of force.

At this point, the United States and Britain only had enough aircraft to enforce a no-fly zone in the face of limited Iraqi air action and minimal ground forces, and Kuwait only had four understrength brigades. The United States, Britain, and Kuwait had no contingency plans to deal with a growing Iraqi build-up, but the United States and Britain rushed into action on October 7, 1994.

The United States launched "Operation Vigilant Warrior" between October 8, 1994, and October 15, 1994. It rushed in elements of the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) to provide a forward U.S. presence and pre-mission training for elements of Kuwaiti forces and then the United States established a Combat Air Support (CAS) umbrella over the northern third of the State of Kuwait with five Special Forces teams that deployed 15 forward air control (FAC) Teams. It prepared a mechanized brigade of the 24th Infantry Division and rushed elements forward to Camp Doha in Kuwait, which had prepositioned equipment that it started to employ within 72 hours, plus two Patriot batteries from Louisiana. It deployed Marine Forces to Saudi Arabia and 10 attack aircraft to a base in Kuwait. Britain deployed combat ships, aircraft, and land force elements of the Royal Marines in coordination with Kuwait and the United States.

As was the case in Korea, this illustrates the need to emphasize deterrence and contingency planning as a deterrence to war even in cases where the probability of attack seems limited. It is notable that the United States also had to enforce the no-fly zone with air strikes on Iraqi targets in September 1996, in December 1998, as late as February 2001 according to some reports.<sup>14</sup>

The second war the United States fought in Iraq occurred when U.S. and several European allies launched a major invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003. These forces decisively defeated the Iraqi forces, occupied Baghdad, and drove Saddam Hussein from power on April 9, 2003. Their stated

strategic objective behind this invasion was to deprive Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, although Iraq was also accused of supporting terrorism.

It soon became apparent, however, that the war had been triggered by critical U.S. intelligence failures that grossly exaggerated estimates of both a continuing Iraqi effort to deploy weapons of mass destruction and its terrorist threat. This estimate was used to justify an invasion with the support of policy level ideologues in the Department of Defense, which felt that it was critical for the United States to oust Saddam and which processed hard for military action.<sup>15</sup> In practice, a presidential commission that reviewed the result of postwar efforts to find such a threat concluded that “not one bit” of the intelligence was correct and Day Kay, the top weapons inspector, stated that, “We were almost all wrong.”<sup>16</sup>

Once again, the United States went to war without a credible plan for creating a stable peace. Driven by the same ideologues, and by equally biased Iraqi exiles who advised them, the United States then assumed after a rapid victory over Saddam's forces that it would be relatively easy to use a peace settlement and Iraq oil wealth to create a functioning democracy in Iraq, and that its deep divisions between Sunni and Shiite and Arab and Kurd would not present critical challenges. In practice, Iraq divided into hostile factions and quickly showed that a weak and inexperienced new government could not overcome its lack of political and social unity, its major economic and social problems, and its failed and corrupt levels of governance.

The result was that the United States had to fight two follow-on wars – creating the second and third wars involving major uses of U.S. combat forces in battle in Iraq. Although President Bush announced that the war was over and “mission accomplished” on May 1, 2003, and the Iraqi Army was disbanded on May 23, 2003, the situation rapidly became steadily more tense and violent leading to major attacks by Sunni extremists like Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in key cities like Baghdad, Karbala, and Fallujah in early 2004.

The war between the Shi'ite dominated government and hostile Sunnis then broadened to the point where it included a much larger range of hardline Sunni elements that opposed both the new Iraqi government and the fact U.S. and allied forces had stayed in Iraq once Saddam fell from power.

This second war forced the United States and its allies to halt their force withdrawals from Iraq in early 2004, to conduct a major nationwide counterinsurgency campaign, and to try to rebuild the Iraq Army and Security forces. A democratic election did take place during this period, but the election did not change the deeply divided and corrupt structure of new Iraqi government that the United States had helped establish after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

As a result, the situation continued to deteriorate until the United States began to deploy a major “surge” of additional forces in January 2007, and build-up even higher force levels than it used in invading Iraq in 2003. The United States also adopted a new and more effective counterinsurgency strategy while support for the Sunni extremist forces dropped precipitously once they began to attack fellow Sunni tribal leaders in 2006–2007. This created a powerful local Sunni armed resistance to the extremists called the “Awakening” that began in Anbar in 2007 and which cooperated with U.S. and Iraq government forces.

The war drove many Iraqi Christians out of the country and religious minorities like the Yazidis suffered badly, but Iraqi government forces did grow in capability, and the Iraqi government both made some economic progress and eased some of the “debathification” measures that

divided Sunni and Shiite. By 2008, the Iraq government and U.S. and other allied forces seemed to have largely suppressed AQI and other Sunni extremist forces, and by February 2009, the United States began a major drawdown in its forces from a peak in 2007 of some 168,000 to a transitional level of 35,000 to 50,000 personnel. The United States then withdrew its forces from Iraqi cities at the end of June 2009 and formally ended combat operations in the war on August 31, 2010

It is important to note, however, that the Iraqi government remained divided, weak, and corrupt. Development was limited, jobs were scarce, and much of Iraq's oil income was wasted on unproductive state industries.<sup>17</sup> Kurd and Arab and Sunni and Shiite remained divided, and the new Iraqi military was divided and heavily dependent on outside support. The defeat of AQI and the hardline Sunni opposition occurred as much because of the fact its elements were so extreme that most Sunnis came to oppose them as by Iraqi, U.S., and allied forces.

The fourth war—and the third major use of U.S. forces in a war inside Iraq—still continues at low levels in eastern Syria. It has been fought largely against the Islamic State of Iraq or ISIL and associated religious and ethnic extremists, although some clashes with pro-Iranian Shiite militias occurred as early as 2004.

ISIL began as an offshoot of Al Qaeda. It initially was a relatively small force and some experts estimated in 2007 that it had nearly been defeated. By , but it began to recover serious strength in 2010 as the Syrian civil war continued and as the Iraqi government remained weak and divided. It steadily built up its strength after 2011, operating largely outside Iraq's population centers, but steadily developed more effective forces while Iraqi forces suffered from the withdrawal of outside combat support after the defeat of Sunni hardliners in the previous war. ISIL began a major offensive in 2014 that reached major Iraqi population centers like Mosul and Tikrit and came close to threatening Baghdad. ISIL's leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, then announced the formation of a new "caliphate" stretching from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq, on June 29, 2014.

These victories forced the United States to resume air strikes in Iraq in August and to deploy a major new military assistance and combat effort in Iraq called Operation Inherent Resolve in October—although Figure 1 shows that it was smaller than the one the United States had deployed in its invasion in 2003 and its war against Sunni Islamic extremists. The result was a grim mix of intense guerrilla and sometime urban warfare and other combat air strikes. Its intensity is indicated by the fact the United States conducted some 8,000 air strikes in Iraq and Syria in 2015.<sup>18</sup>

By March 2009, ISIL had been driven out of its major urban gains, and had lost at least 90 percent of its territory, including key cities like Mosul and its capital at Raqqa. This led the Iraqi prime minister to claim victory in December. In fact, however, the war has not ended. ISIL remains a threat in Syria and is still an all too significant extremist force. Although President Trump also declared victory in December 2018 and stated he would withdraw the last 2,000 U.S. troops, ISIL only lost control of its last territory in Baghouz, Syria, in March 2019, and a cadre of U.S. troops and advisers still supports anti-ISIL Kurdish and Arab forces in Eastern Syria. At the same time, Iran has also established increasing ties to various Iraqi Shi'ite factions and became a major influence in Iraq able to compete with the United States.

When it comes to realistic assessments of the grand strategic lessons of these three wars in Iraq, they warn that the United States failed to perform adequate strategic triage and failed to properly

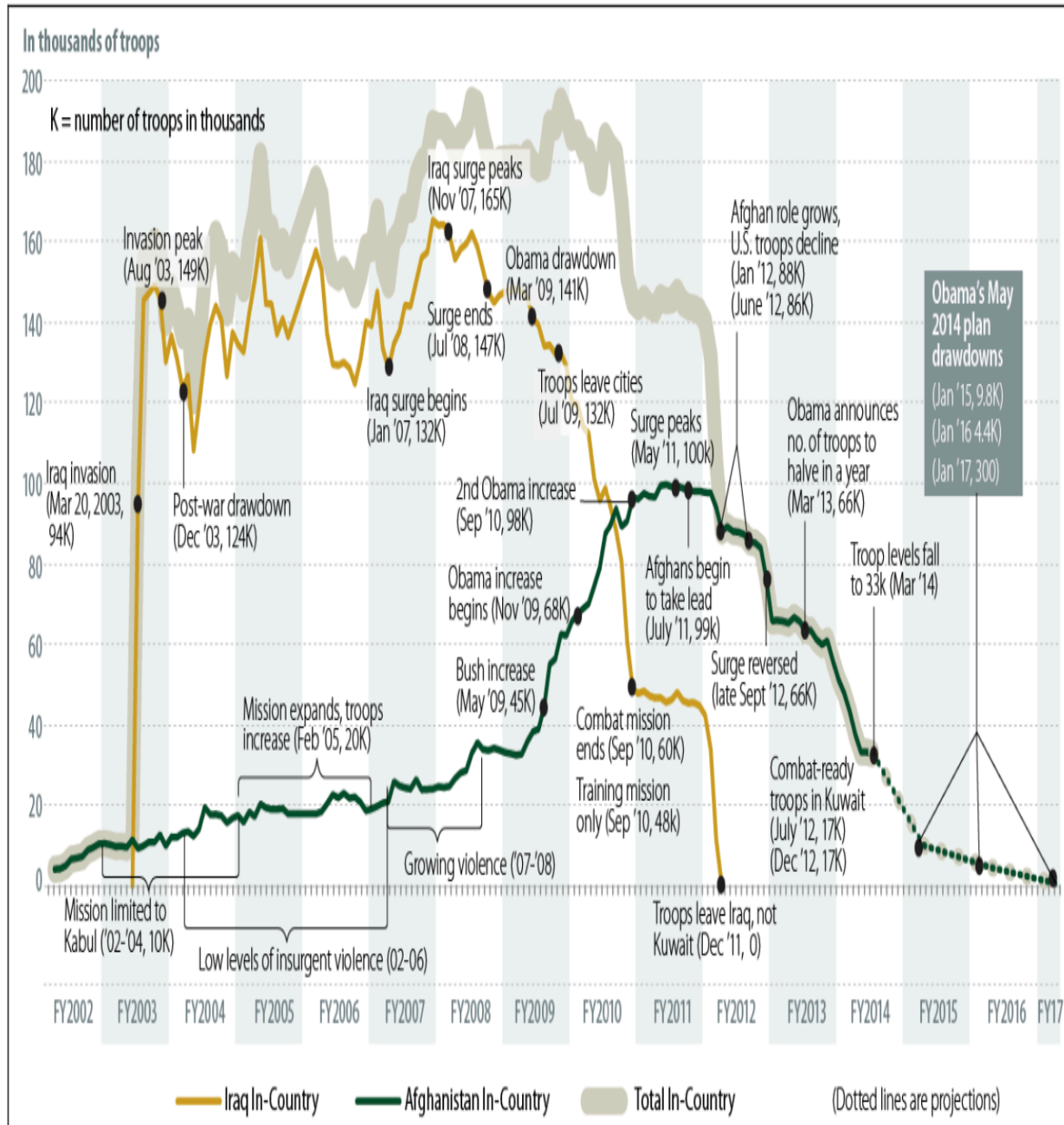
define clear goals for nation-building and plans for ending the fighting in some stable form. The work of the Special Inspector General for Iraqi Reconstruction (SIGIR) is still available on the web and shows that the United States made many of the same mistakes in nation-building in terms of politics, governance, development, and creating effective military forces that it made in Vietnam and in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup>

SIGIR's funding profile for the U.S. reconstruction effort is shown in Figure 2. Its boom-and-bust character shows the lack of any stable nation- and force-building effort, as well as the lack of a coordinated efforts within the U.S. government and between the Defense and State Departments even in comparison with the U.S. effort in Vietnam and bears a striking resemblance to the profile of U.S. funding in Afghanistan shown later in Figure 2.<sup>20</sup> Equally important, the second part of Figure 2 shows the level of dependence on contractors and that personnel levels were high than the troop level total indicate.

It is also important to note that that the United States still has no clear grand strategy for Iraq and the region around it—including Syria, Turkey, and its Arab strategic partners. The United States is still involved in low-level fighting in eastern Syria and its three wars have left Iraq divided and unstable—although it does now seem to be becoming more stable and able to focus on the needs of its people. It all too many ways, the U.S. “victory” in 1991 effectively created four wars in Iraq for the price of “won” in Kuwait.

**Figure 1: Estimate of U.S. Troop Levels in Iraq: 2003 Invasion, War against Sunni Extremists, and War against ISIL – Part One: FY 2001-FY 2017**

**Boots on the Ground In-Country, FY2001-FY2017 in thousands of U.S. troops**

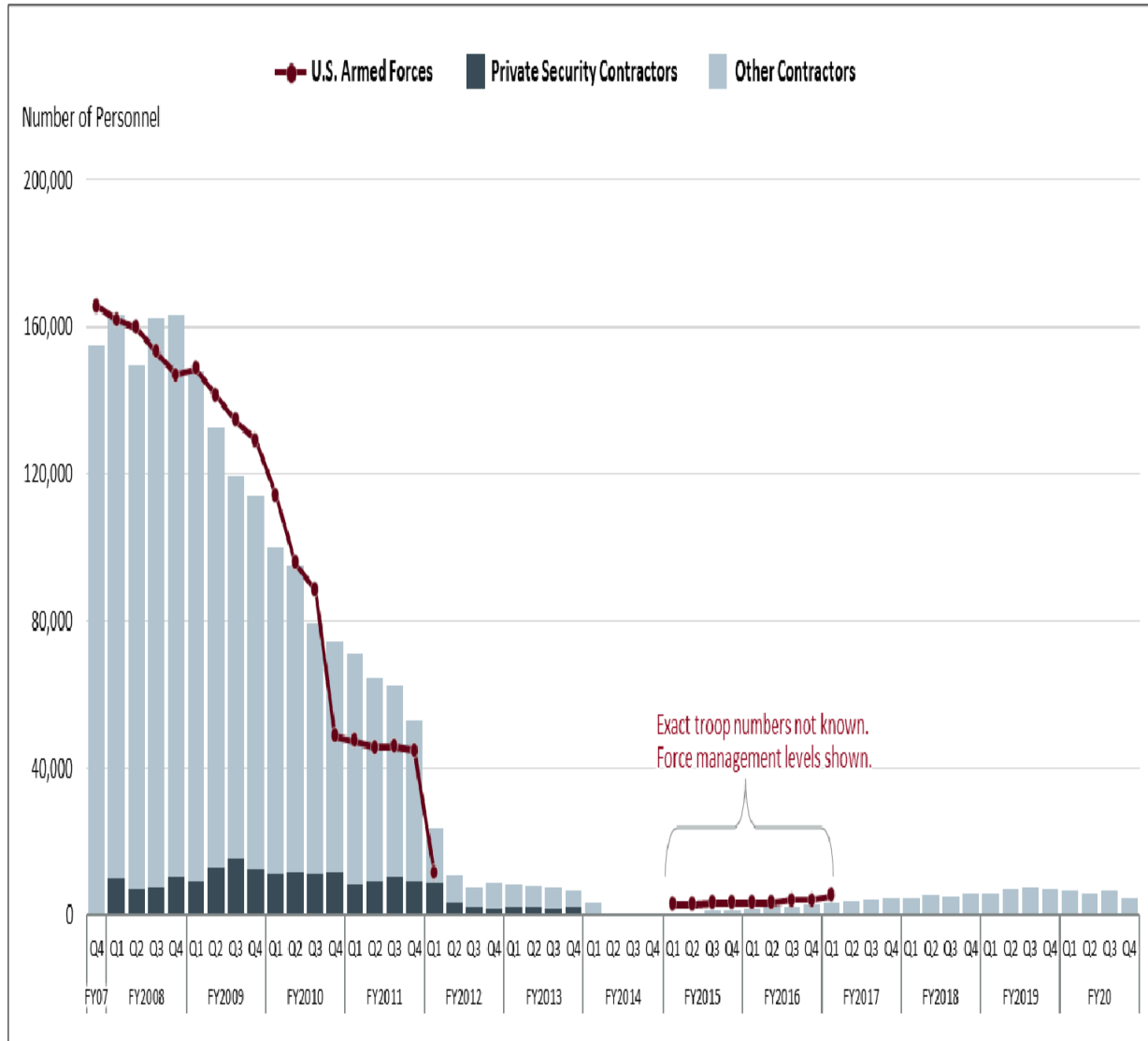


Notes: Reflects U.S. troops in-country; excludes troops providing in-theater support or conducting counter-terror operations outside the region.

Source: DOD, Monthly Boots-on-the Ground reports provided to CRS and congressional defense committees, 2001-June 2014. For month-by-month troop levels, both in-country and in-theater see: U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations since 9/11* by Amy Belasco, RL33110 (2014), 9, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf>.

### Figure 1: Estimate of U.S. Troop Levels in Iraq: 2003 Invasion, War against Sunni Extremists, and War against ISIL – Part Two: FY 2007-FY 2020

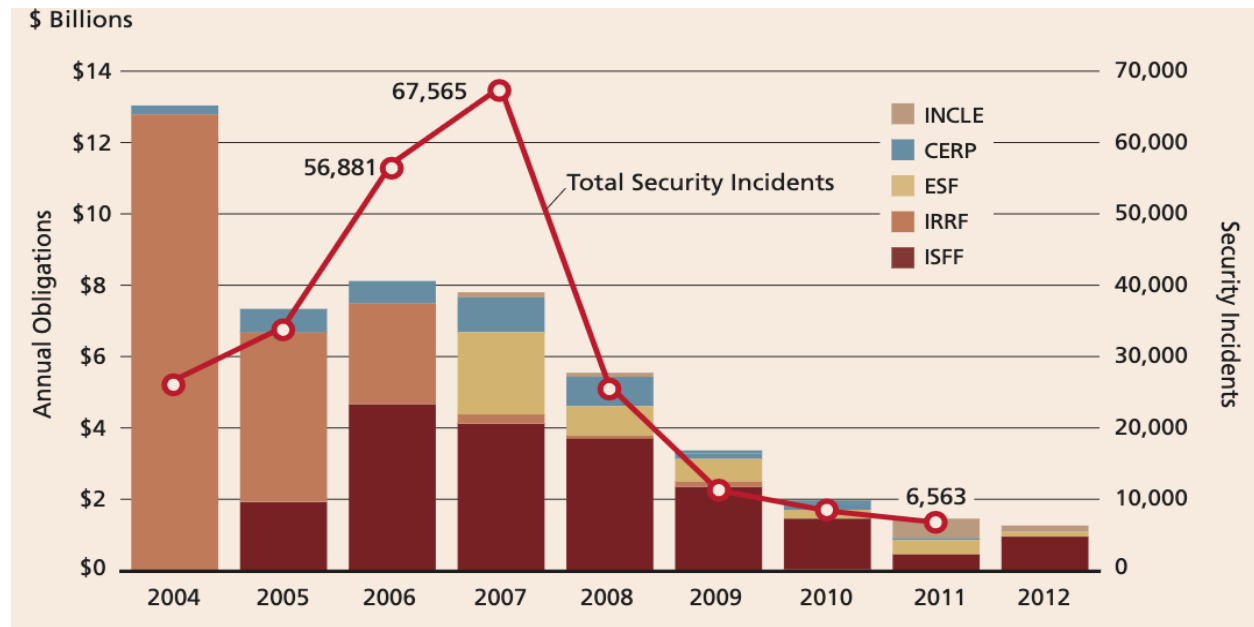
U.S. Armed Forces and DOD-Funded Contractor Personnel in Iraq (2007-) and Syria (2018-)  
(Q4 F72007–Q1 FY2014; Q1 FY2015–Q4 FY2020)



Notes: DOD began releasing data on DOD-funded private security contractor personnel in USCENTCOM in Q1 FY 2008 and ceased reporting data on DOD-funded private security contractor personnel in Iraq in Q4 FY 2013. Between Q1 FY 2014 and Q4 FY2014, no data on any DOD-funded contractor personnel in Iraq was released. In Q2 FY 2018, DOD began reporting a combined total of contractor personnel physically located in Iraq and Syria. U.S. Armed Forces levels for Q4 FY 2007–Q1 FY 2012 included all active and reserve component personnel. Following the conclusion of the U.S. combat mission in Iraq in 2011, the “Boots on the Ground” reports ceased providing separate force levels for Iraq. Beginning in 2014, in support of U.S. military operations against the Islamic State, additional U.S. military personnel were deployed to Iraq.  
Source: Contractor levels drawn from USCENTCOM Quarterly Contractor Census Reports and depicts the number of DOD-funded armed private security contractors as a subset of all reported DOD-funded contractors; U.S. Armed Forces levels from Q4 FY 2007–Q1 FY 2012 drawn from “Boots on the Ground” monthly reports to Congress. U.S. Armed Forces levels for Q1 FY 2015–Q1 FY 2017 drawn from White House semiannual “War Powers Resolution Report” to Congress. See: U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007–2020* by Heidi M. Peters, R4416 (update 2021), 12, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R44116.pdf>.

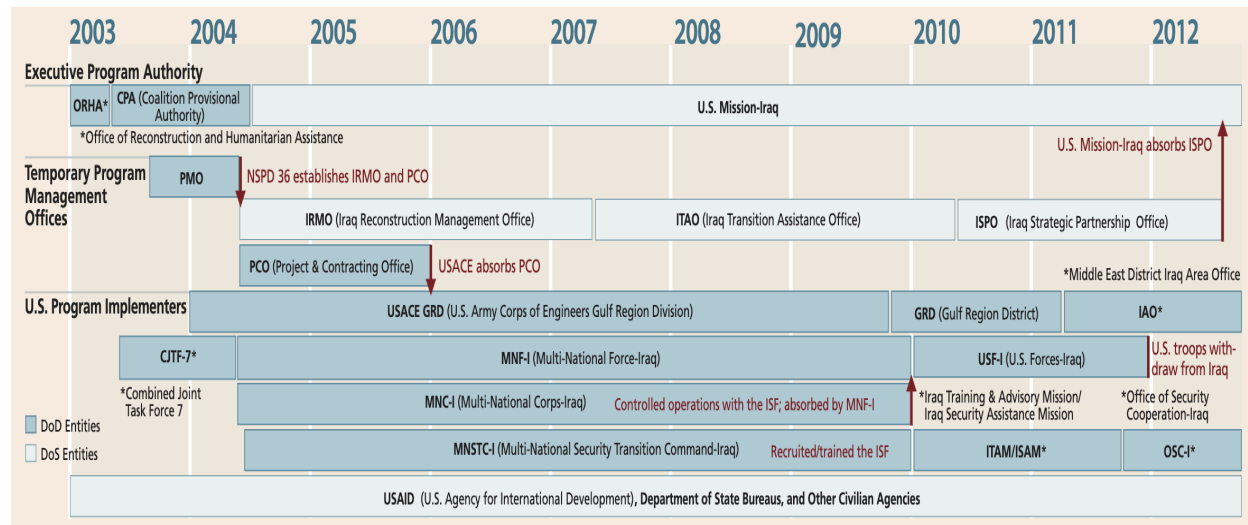
## Figure 2: Boom and Bust Funding, in the U.S. Military and Civil Aid Effort in Iraq

Annual Obligations, by Funding Source vs. Security Incidents, 2004–2012



### Constant Instability in Program Planning and Management and Underfunding of Nation-Building\*

#### Iraq Reconstruction Program Execution, 2003–2012



\* Although State had executive authority over reconstruction by the second year, Defense implementers oversaw most of the work performed.

ISFF=Iraq Security Forces Fund, ESF=Economic Support Fund, CERP = Commander’s Emergency Relief Program, CERP = Civilian Emergency Relief Program, IRRF= Iraq relief and Reconstruction Fund; INCLE=International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement Fund.

Source: Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Learning from Iraq: A Final Report from the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction* (SIGAR, March 2013), 38–39, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA587236.pdf>.

## Two Decades of Failure in Afghanistan

The previous analysis shows that the grand strategic outcome of major U.S. engagements in combat since World War II has had at least some elements of ambiguity and victory. The Afghan War from 2001 to 2021, however, is a case where the United States lost a major war without achieving any grand strategic gains. Its course and outcome are recent enough so that it does not need to be analyzed in detail, but the United States clearly repeated all too many of the strategic and grand strategic mistakes the United States made in its other wars after 1945.

The intense anger in reaction to the September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda attacks on the United States meant that the United States never exercised a proper level of strategic tirage in deciding to go to war against the Taliban and implementing a joint resolution authorizing the use of force that was rushed to a vote on September 18, 2001. The United States then was able to quickly defeat the Taliban and drive it out of the country using U.S. air power, special forces, and intelligence personnel in combination with the Afghan Northern Alliance within a matter of weeks.

As a result, the United States rushed efforts to pass UN Security Council Resolution on November 14, 2001. This resolution called for the UN—effectively under U.S. leadership—to play a “central role” in creating a transitional authority, peacekeeping forces, and provide aid without any clear picture of what this would mean. The Bonn Conference that followed began the creation of a government with both U.S. leadership and that of Iran, and made Hamid Kharzai leader without any real planning, or evaluation of what level of U.S. commitment was involved. It created a government with a weak legal and administrative base, a leader with limited factional support, and sharply overcentralized control of national and foreign aid funds.

President Bush then gave a speech on April 17, 2002, calling for an effort to free Afghanistan from evil and to implement the equivalent of the Marshall Plan for a deeply divided and undeveloped country with no history of effective central government. Kharzai was made head of a transitional government in June 2002, and the United States rushed to create an economic aid structure by November 2002 that was based largely on national foreign aid to individual provinces with no clear overall structure, plan, or effort to deal with Afghanistan's factional divisions.

As a chronology of the war in Afghanistan reports, “During a briefing with reporters in Kabul, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declares an end to ‘major combat.’”<sup>21</sup> The announcement coincides with President Bush's “mission accomplished” declaration of an end to fighting in Iraq. Rumsfeld says President Bush, U.S. Central Command Chief Gen. Tommy Franks, and Afghan President Karzai “have concluded that we are at a point where we clearly have moved from major combat activity to a period of stability and stabilization and reconstruction and activities.”<sup>22</sup>

At the time of Rumsfeld's statement, there were only some 8,000 U.S. soldiers stationed in Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> The accuracy of his “end to major combat” is indicated by the fact NATO ISAF was established in August 2003 with some 5,000 troops to secure Kabul in its environs, and the return of the Taliban forces it to expand its mission nationally and rise to nearly 65,000 troops by October 2006. As for nation-building, an Assembly of some 502 Afghan delegates met to draft a constitution in January 2004. This constitution attempted to solve Afghanistan's divisions by creating an extremely strong presidency with near total control over senior appointments and the use of state funds. Kharzai was “elected” president in a hollow election in October 2004, and

legislative and local elections were held in September 2005, in ways that did little to either create an effective structure of governance or to unite the country.

As for the military side of nation-building, the Taliban steadily became a more serious threat from 2006 onwards, as did the internal divisions between given factions. The United States and NATO failed, however, to address the problems that quickly arose in building up Afghan forces. As late as November 2006, a Council on Foreign Relations report notes that NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer set a target of 2008 for the Afghan National Army to begin to take control of security. "I would hope that by 2008 we will have made considerable progress," he says, "with a more stable political architecture in place, and with a strong interface between NATO and the civilian agencies and effective, trusted Afghan security forces gradually taking control."<sup>24</sup>

Somewhat ironically, NATO came close to repeating this process in November 2010, when NATO countries sign a declaration calling for a transition to full Afghan responsibility for security that was to begin at the local level in July 2011, and end with the withdrawal of virtually U.S. troops and Afghan responsibility for all security efforts by the end of 2014,

As was the case earlier in Vietnam and later in Iraq, United States then continued its intervention in Afghanistan with no clear plan for the outcome it wanted and without properly assessing the risks of making a major commitment to a theater that was at most of secondary importance. It did so without having properly examined what level of U.S. effort was justified relative to its other strategic priorities and needs, and it focused more on creating some form of representative government than one that could unite the country and function effectively.

Throughout the war, America's declared grand strategy was a vague mix of good intentions. The United States continued to back Afghan governments that failed to serve and unify Afghanistan's population and were grossly incompetent and corrupt. It proceeded to do so years after the time when it was clear that the United States faced an almost impossible challenge in creating an Afghan army, air force, and security forces that could defend the country on their own. And as was the case in Vietnam, the United States finally left without honestly assessing the impact of its departure or fully including the host government in a set of peace negotiations whose real goal was to set a date certain for U.S. departure.

There are many indicators of such U.S. failures in SIGAR and media reporting, but one that deserves far more attention is the "boom and bust" nature of the civil and military resources the U.S. committed to the war. As Figure 3 shows, the "boom" in U.S. deployments of U.S. military forces and contract personnel to Afghanistan occurred from 2002 to 2012. The "bust" in such forces occurred from 2013 to 2021 as the rapidly phased its force levels down.,

Figure 4 shows the scale of a similar "boom" in U.S. spending between FY 2003 and FY 2013, followed by a "bust" in U.S. efforts from FY 2013 to FY 2016 that was not offset by the creation of effective Afghan forces and did not prevent a steady growth in the strength and coverage of Taliban forces. These erratic and "boom and bust" budget data make the real-world gap between the actual flow of U.S. resources and the vague goals in the strategic rhetoric issued by the U.S. government is brutally clear.<sup>25</sup>

While nominal efforts were made to create a joint civil-military plan for the U.S. aid effort, these efforts were largely cosmetic, did little more than set general goals, and never led to close coordination between either the military effort or the civil one. As was the case for much of the

U.S. aid effort in Iraq, the Department of Defense, State Department, USAID, other departments, and the U.S. intelligence community efforts were often largely separate, and major program efforts led by given departments and agencies were poorly coordinated.

U.S. leadership of the NATO command effort did provide some coordination of the military effort, but the quality of planning and realism varied sharply over the years. UN efforts to coordinate the civil effort by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) were a total failure, and efforts to hold donor conferences with the Afghan government did little more than set a series on unrealistic promises and goals. The same was true of most of the work of the IMF and World Bank, although World Bank field teams did produce some realistic assessments of the problems in the Afghan government's use of aid money and its effectiveness.

At the same time, the detailed quarterly and lessons of war reporting to Congress by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) shows that many key U.S. efforts lacked consistent and coherent planning and that U.S. efforts failed to either create effective Afghan forces or an effective Afghan government.<sup>26</sup> These failures are equally clear if one examines the trends in other metrics like, the number of military advisors actually present versus the number reported, the changing levels of U.S. air combat support, and the exaggeration in the claims made regarding the levels of active personnel in Afghan forces.

Figure 4 also provides broad indicators of the emphasis the United States placed on warfighting versus nation-building by showing the comparatively limited levels of spending in key areas of civil aid to Afghan economic development. It also shows how few resources went into reconstruction and "nation-building" at a time when the Afghan government was failing to govern effectively or honestly at virtually every level and remained deeply divided and corrupt.

Moreover, the massive swings or "turbulence" in spending shown in SIGAR reporting on individual major programs indicates that many of the claims of steady progress made by various federal agencies during FY 2002 to FY 2022 had to have been exaggerated. They warn that the failure to provide honest and transparent reporting on the successes and failures and the extent to which official U.S. reports became a "liar's contest" as the war progressed—an issue that has not yet been fully examined and vetted and that the previous analysis warns has been a problem in far too much of the official reporting on other U.S. wars since 1945.<sup>27</sup>

Several such failures in U.S. official unclassified reporting on the Afghan war are particularly important. A detailed review of SIGAR and media reporting shows that U.S. official reporting on the Afghan War consistently failed to honestly assess the civil failures of the Afghan government to use aid money honestly and effectively, and to accurately assess and report on its real levels of civil progress. U.S. reporting also became steadily less honest with time, and The United States gradually canceled most official reporting on progress or failure by district and then on the level of stability and central government control by province.<sup>28</sup>

The same is true of official reporting on the progress Afghan forces made in moving toward the ability to operate and fight on their own. This becomes all too clear if one examines the U.S. command's reporting on levels of U.S. and Afghan military success as the Taliban gained in power and influence.

The United States began to issue misleading reports about "victories" by creating new metrics like Enemy Initiated Attacks (EIAs). Then, as the United States made major cuts in its forces and spending, and as Taliban strength and activity increased, the United States eliminated reporting

on progress in nation-building by district and tailored its reporting in ways that steadily exaggerated levels of success.

It increasingly did so at a time when such tactical victories depended on U.S. air support, the presence of U.S. advisers and elements of elite U.S. forces. Many of the supposed Afghan victories in major urban areas were won by U.S. forces and a small numbers of elite Afghan units that had to be withdrawn once a temporary tactical victory had been achieved. These tactical victories kept cities key and provincial capitals from falling fully into Taliban hands, but they did not produce a lasting local defense capability or effective governance and political and social unity.

The withdrawal of U.S. and elite forces after such victories often allowed the Taliban to exploit the fear and the disarray that followed the departure of elite Afghan units and major U.S. air support, and the Taliban made consistent strategic gains. To paraphrase the comments of Harry Summers on U.S. victories in Vietnam, every such victory became increasingly irrelevant years before the Afghan government suddenly began to lose whole provinces and the war ended with the “sudden” collapse of the government in Kabul. on August 15, 2021.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, SIGAR quarterly reporting to Congress, and reporting on the lessons of the war, makes it clear that U.S. government reporting on the Afghan war from at least 2017 onwards failed to honestly report the impact of cutting U.S. advisers, contractors, and combat support on the ability of real-world capability of most Afghan forces to move toward the ability to operate and fight on their own. U.S. reporting overstated Afghan military capabilities in terms of numbers, readiness, and ability to operate without U.S. air power, and “advisory” support in land combat.

By the time the Trump administration came to office, it was clear to many senior U.S. policymakers and officers that the Afghan government and forces Afghanistan could only survive if the United States continued to indefinitely support Afghanistan with active U.S. combat forces and fund virtually all of the Afghan government's military and civil efforts. It was also clear that the Ghani government was not effective in leading the military effort, in managing nation-building, in unifying Afghan factions, or in winning mass support.

President Trump did initially declare in an address to U.S. troops on August 21, 2017, that his original instinct was to “pull out,” but that he would press ahead with an open-ended commitment to avoid creating “a vacuum for terrorists.” He changed his mind, however, as the fighting became steadily more intense, and it remained clear that Afghan still lack an effective government and progress toward some predictable date when Afghan government forces could take responsibility for security. The United States initiated serious peace talks with the Taliban in 2018, and by February 2019, it was clear the United States might use the talks as a reason to withdraw its remaining troops.

This created a crisis when the United States tried to push Ghani into active peace negotiations that would allow the United States to withdraw after Trump came to office. When Ghani resisted such pressure, the United States bypassed him, and the Trump administration negotiated directly with the Taliban without the Ghani government's direct participation. The Trump administration then signed four-point Joint Declaration on February 29, 2020, that called for the image of a peace process, and implied the peace effort has the full support of the Afghan government. In practice, it focused far more on setting a date certain for U.S. withdrawal.<sup>30</sup>

In many ways, the U.S. negotiations with the Taliban repeated the U.S. process of negotiating a withdrawal with North Vietnam. They largely bypassed the Afghan government, but with the difference that the Afghan forces and level of governance were far weaker than the South Vietnamese government and the ARVN, and there was no prospect of agreeing on an actual peace settlement. A weak and incapable Afghan government was left to negotiate largely on its own as the Taliban began to step up its attacks and the United States moved toward the date certain for withdrawal.

The Biden administration made little change in this progress. It came to office in early 2021 and inherited a situation where the remaining U.S. troop presence had already dropped from some 13,000 to 2,500 personnel, and where restoring a viable U.S. capability to operate in Afghanistan faced massive difficulties. However, President Biden also supported ending the war, and did little more than change the U.S. final withdrawal date from May 1, 2001, to September 11, 2021.

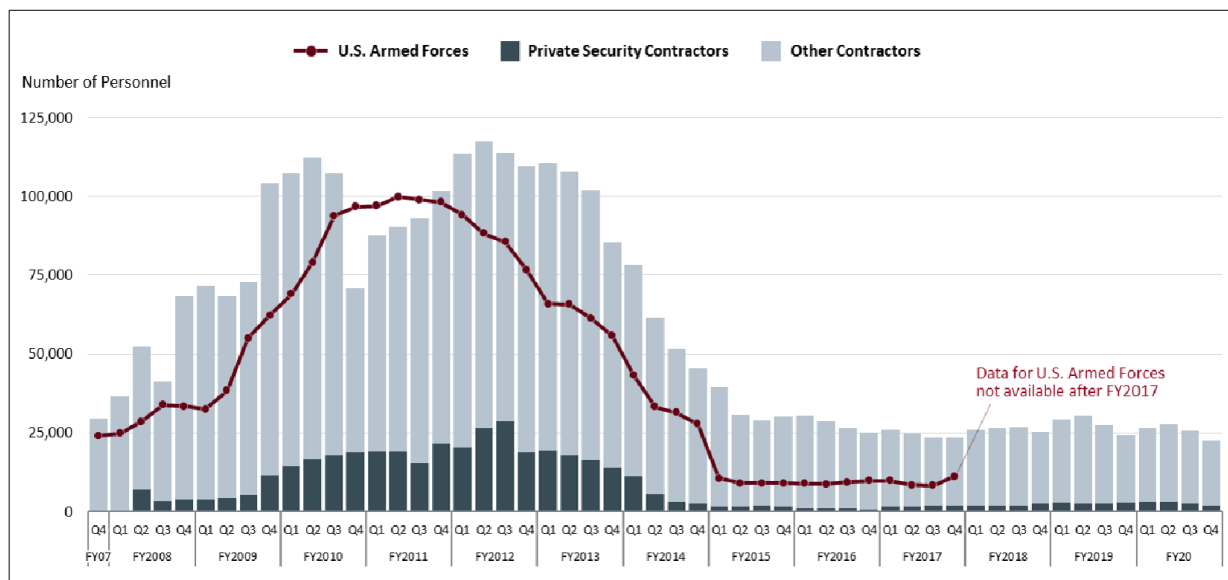
In practice, the Taliban had already begun to make major gains in the countryside, and the Department of Defense issued a report on May 18 stating that the Taliban had increased its attacks by 37 percent in the first quarter of 2021 and was preparing for large-scale offenses. The United States left Bagram Air Force base on July 6, removing the only remaining alternative to an air evacuation out of Bagram air base.

Biden then advanced the departure date for U.S. forces to August 31, although he stated on July 8 that a Taliban takeover was not inevitable, and that the Taliban was not “not remotely comparable in terms of capability” to the North Vietnam Army. Somewhat ironically, the Taliban then took its first provincial capital on August 6, proceed to seize many others, and entered Kabul on August 16—the same day that President Ghani fled the country. The Taliban scored its unexpected and decisive victory in Afghanistan in even less time than the North Vietnamese forces took to carry out their final defeat of the ARVN and seize Saigon.

If reports are true that the U.S. intelligence community, Joint Chiefs, and NSC failed to warn the Trump and Biden administrations that the Afghan government and forces could collapse, and that a sudden catalytic collapse was all too possible, this is a further indication of the need to force fully objective assessments of strategy and risk. Such a failure would mean that the United States failed to understand that a peace negotiation with the Taliban that did not include the Afghan government, that produced no visible options for a successful peace, and that set deadlines for a full U.S. withdrawal—with, or without, a peace agreement—was likely to fatally undermine an already weak Afghan government.

### Figure 3: The Afghan Alps: Boom and Bust, in U.S. Armed Forces and Contractor Personnel in Afghanistan: FY 2007-FY 2020

U.S. Armed Forces and DOD-Funded Contractor Personnel in Afghanistan Q4 FY2007–Q4 FY2020



**Source:** Created by CRS. Contractor levels drawn from USCENTCOM Quarterly Contractor Census Reports; U.S. Armed Forces levels through Q4 FY2017 drawn from “Boots on the Ground” monthly reports to Congress.

**Notes:** DOD began releasing data on contractors in USCENTCOM in Q4 FY2007. U.S. Armed Forces levels from FY2007 to FY2017 included all active and reserve component personnel. After FY2017, DOD began withholding U.S. Armed Forces levels from public release.

#### U.S. Armed Forces and DOD-Funded Contractor Personnel in Afghanistan (Q4 FY2007-Q4 FY2020)

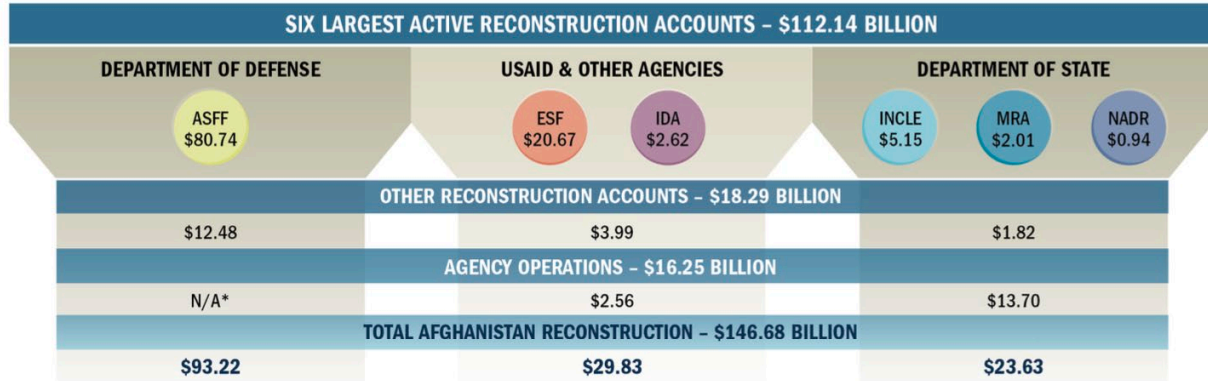
Quarter (Q) and Fiscal Year (FY)	U.S. Armed Forces	Contractors		
		U.S. National Contractors	Foreign and Host Country National Contractors	Total Contractors
Q4 2007	24,056	3,387	26,086	29,473
Q4 2008	33,450	5,405	62,847	68,252
Q4 2009	62,300	9,322	94,779	104,101
Q4 2010	96,600	20,874	48,725	70,599
Q4 2011	99,800	23,190	78,599	101,789
Q4 2012	76,500	31,814	77,750	109,564
Q4 2013	55,800	27,188	58,340	85,528
Q4 2014	27,800	17,477	27,872	45,349
Q4 2015	9,100	10,347	19,864	30,211
Q4 2016	9,800	9,142	16,055	25,197
Q4 2017	11,000	9,418	14,241	23,659
Q4 2018	NA	10,989	14,250	25,239
Q4 2019	NA	10,750	13,452	24,202
Q4 2020	3,000 <sup>a</sup>	7,856	14,706	22,562

<sup>a</sup> Cut to 2,500 by January 15, 2021

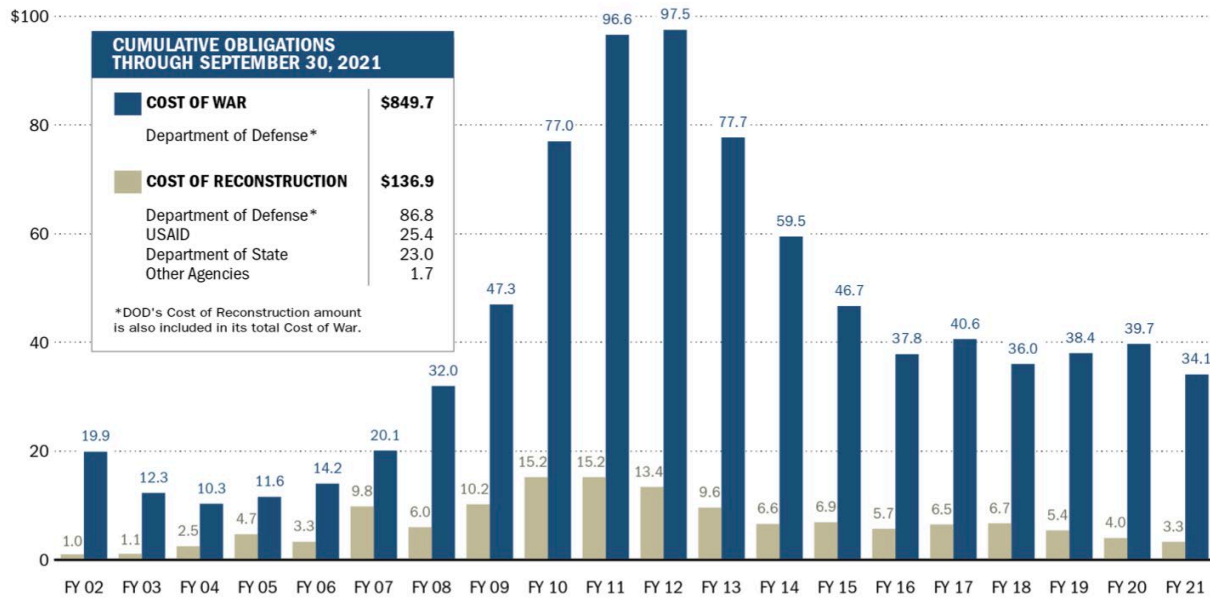
Source: U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007–2020* by Heidi M. Peters, Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2020, Congressional Research Service, February 22, 2021, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R44116.pdf>, 6–7.

### Figure 4: The Afghan Alps: Massive Instability, Sudden Booms and Busts, and Cumulative Turbulence in Major Military and Civil Funding – Part One

Priority for Building Up Afghan Forces over Nation Building and Development FY2002–1Q FY2023



### Massive Boom and Bust Annual Swings in Total Military and in Reconstruction Funding: FY2002–1Q FY2023 (\$ billions)



Note: Numbers have been rounded. Cumulative obligations reported by DOD for the Cost of War through September 30, 2021, differ markedly from cumulative appropriations through March 31, 2022, as presented elsewhere in the Status of Funds section, because the former figures do not include unobligated appropriations and DOD Cost of War reporting currently lags by two quarters.

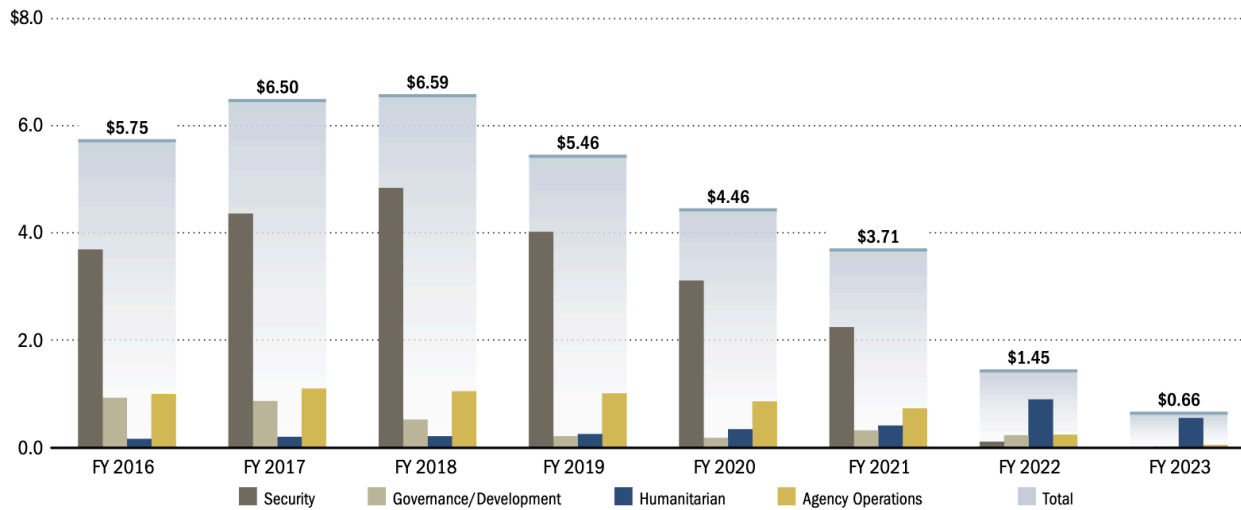
Source: DOD, Cost of War Monthly Report, Total War-related Obligations by Year Incurred, data as of September 30, 2021. Obligation data shown against year funds obligated. SIGAR analysis of annual obligation of reconstruction accounts as presented in SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 10/30/2021. Obligation data shown against year funds appropriated.

ASFF=Afghanistan Security Forces Fund, ESF=Economic Support Fund, IDA = International Disaster Insurance, INCLE=International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement Fund, MRA = Migration and Refugee Assistance, NADR: Non-Proliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related Programs, CERP = Civilian Emergency Relief Program, ARTF=Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund

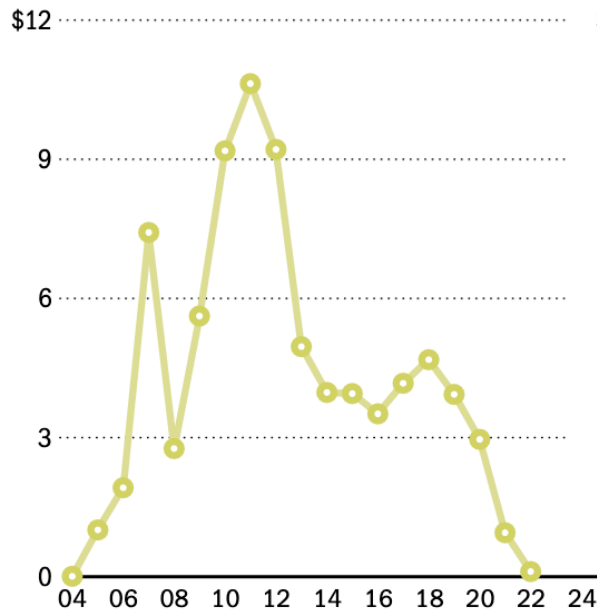
Source: Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Quarterly Report to U.S. Congress* (SIGAR, April 2023), 29–32, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2023-04-30qr.pdf>.

### Figure 4: The Afghan Alps: Massive Instability, Sudden Booms and Busts, and Cumulative Turbulence in Major Military and Civil Funding – Part Two

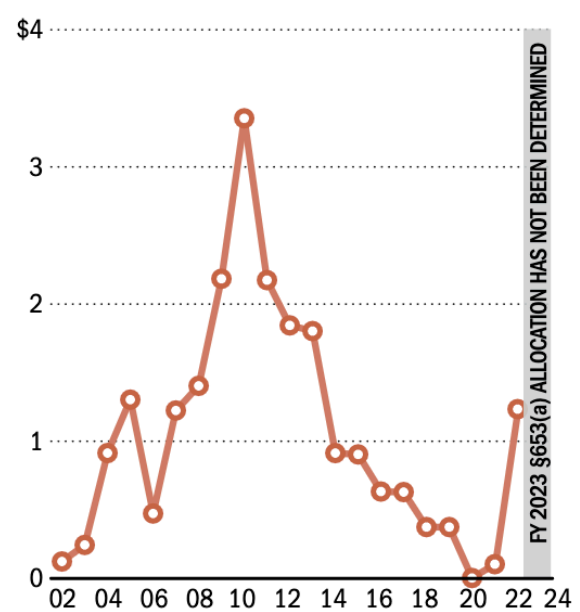
Annual Appropriations by Funding Category in Billions



Afghan Security Force Funds (\$ Billions)



Economic Support Funds (\$ Billions)



Source: Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Quarterly Report to U.S. Congress*, 31, 40–41.

## **Learning the Real Lessons of War**

This analysis of each of America's grand strategic failures in warfighting since 1945 shows all too clearly that it failed to learn the right lessons from these wars. While there are many unofficial studies that do flag key problems, and some are raised in the official histories of U.S. wars, most official efforts since the end of World War II have consistently understated or ignored critical failures in grand strategy, in conducting the broader course of the war, and in moving towards a successful and stable peace.

This analysis shows that the United States consistently failed to set meaningful grand strategic goals for engaging in a given war. It shows that the United States failed to adequately perform strategic triage in assessing the costs and risks of engaging in combat and in deciding to sustain a major role in combat over time. The United States often began what became a major military engagement by using U.S. forces in advisory roles or low levels of combat. It then escalated to full-scale warfare without properly assessing the costs and risks in escalating U.S. involvement and the probability of ending the conflict with a lasting grand strategic victory.

In most cases involving serious combat, the United States failed to properly address the risks created in trying to support failed host country governments, in dealing with a lack of effective host-country political leadership and unity, and in dealing with deep divisions that existed at an ethnic, tribal, and religious level. It treated a lack of effective civilian economic development, and host country corruption and authoritarian rule as secondary problems, rather than as major challenges to success.

In the cases of Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the United States also attempted to create the shell of a democratic government as a potential solution to nation-building problems regardless of real-world political divisions, inexperienced leaders, and weak overall structure of governance. The United States also failed to assess the problems in creating effective host country military efforts, and in focusing on combat force without creating an effective rule of law or effective local security forces. As a result, it escalated its own role in combat rather than creating host country forces that could stand on their own and focused on winning battles rather than creating lasting stability and security.

## **Setting Clear Grand Strategic Objectives Focused on Creating a Stable Post War Outcome Worth the Cost and Risks of the War**

The need to set meaningful post-conflict grand strategic objectives in going to war, and in deciding to stay at war sustain military and civilian aid to a host country, is one key lesson the United States should learn from its wars. Since 1945, in case after case, the United States never had a clear grand strategic plan or postwar objective in beginning, fighting, and ending a given war. The United States also failed to develop realistic assessments of the cost and risks involved.

Far too often, the United States focused on defeating an enemy in military terms without developing clear goals or objectives for ending the fighting and creating a stable and beneficial postwar outcome. In three critical cases—Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq—it blundered into process of escalation that led to major conflicts that had no clear or consistent real-world end goal other than winning military victories and was either defeated or left the war without achieving grand strategic success.

The United States military did succeed in dominating the fighting in each war or was the key catalyst in winning many or most battles, but—as noted earlier—it did so in ways that were irrelevant in grand strategic terms and particularly in terms of creating credible plans for successful conflict termination.

In Korea, the United States escalated its initial victories to the point that virtually guaranteed Chinese intervention. While it did end the war with a successful stalemate, it was South Korea that eventually created its own strategic success in terms of postwar governance, economic development, and an effective self-defense capability.

In the cases of Vietnam and Afghanistan, the United States focused on using combat forces to subdue the enemy through years of active fighting, rather than setting some achievable grand strategic goal. After decades of fighting, it then reached the point where it made a political decision to withdraw and end the war despite the risk this would mean the defeat of the government it had largely created and fought to support. In Iraq, the United States largely left Iraq four times after claiming military success in warfighting without focusing on the fact the Iraqi government remained too unstable and the country remained too deeply divided to achieve a stable peace.

The United States must not continue to give warfighting precedence over setting clear objectives for creating a favorable and lasting outcome of the war. It must recognize that a lasting victory means solving enough of the deep internal problems in host-country governments, forces, and unity that divide and weaken the states the United States seeks to aid. As noted earlier, the United States cannot succeed by treating the violent symptoms and not the nation-wide diseases that are their cause.

## Exercising Strategic Triage

The United States needs to be far more careful to exercise strategic triage in assessing the risks of committing U.S. forces to combat—both at the start of combat and as a war proceeds. At least part of America's post war failures in warfighting came from escalating into major strategic commitments in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq from 2003 onwards without properly assessing the risks and cost-benefits in committing U.S. forces to combat and then escalating U.S. involvement to the level of warfighting. Costs, however, were only part of the problem. The United States exaggerated the strategic value of all three wars, the importance of the war, and the credibility of being able to achieve a peace that would provide strategic benefits worth their cost.

It also has tended to underestimate the value of taking deterrent action where the United States has serious grand strategic priorities. One option is to deploy deterrent forces when the risk of war becomes serious and to focus on the civil and military aspects of nation-building before a war begins. Korea and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait were cases where the United States might well have chosen to deploy deterrent forces in-country as a potential warfighting threat emerged, or where a more active regional strategic presence might have avoided war. The United States had little choice about fighting a war once North Korea invaded South Korea, or after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait had taken place. Such deterrent efforts would not have been cheap but deploying U.S. forces in a deterrent role, and effective aid and security assistance, are far cheaper options than war.

If one looks at America's strategic successes since World War II, it is also important to stress that almost all of them came from the wars the United States did not have to fight. U.S. postwar international security efforts have generally succeeded when the United States focused on creating and supporting strategic partners like NATO or Japan, when it worked with more capable and effective host country governments, and when it properly assessed the cost and benefits of such efforts in creating effective deterrents and military assistance efforts.

Another key lesson of war is that the United States should focus on strategic triage in assessing the probable and changing difficulties in conflict termination, in achieving a stable level of postwar success and the grand strategic benefits of using the resources the United States may have to commit to war that it can use to meet other strategic needs.

More generally, as SIGAR suggested in the case of Afghanistan, it should make "conditionality" a key aspect of strategic triage and providing aid and U.S. forces. When the United States faces an uncertain situation in terms of the value of the objective and the capability and willingness of an ally to host country to carry out an effective civil and military campaign effort, it should make it explicitly clear that the United States will only make a warfighting commitment and sustain it if the host country or countries make an effective effort. It should be clear that the United States will not support a host country, or stay in a limited or optional war, if the host-country government fails to do its share. It should clearly make committing forces to combat, and military and civil aid, conditional.

The Korean War and the liberation of Kuwait were the only wars the United States fought after 1945 that was of sufficient grand strategic importance to justify a commitment to combat regardless of the capability, effectiveness, and integrity of the host-country government and forces. In all its other wars when looking back at the process of U.S. commitment and escalation from 1945 to 2021, the United States also tended to commit forces to combat against communism and terrorism in ideological terms, and to sustain and escalate its role in combat,

with the tendency to moralize warfighting efforts that Hans Morgenthau warned about at the time the Cold War began.<sup>31</sup>

Using exaggerated political and diplomatic rhetoric, and winning battles of influence, is a necessary fact of life, but it is a tool and not a realistic measure of self-interest or justification for war. Using emotional buzz words like “communist,” “terrorist,” and “extremist” to justify involvement in combat is no substitute for a pragmatic and continuing focus on national interest, and a regular reevaluation of the cost-benefits and trade-offs involved.

Here, it is interesting to consider a possible future war over Taiwan. As was the case in 1949, China now presents a growing military challenge and is steadily increasing its capability to invade or attack Taiwan. This does create a strong case for aiding Taiwan in developing its forces and creating the kind of rapid and flexible power projection options for the United States failed to create before North Korea invaded the South. It creates an equally strong case for working with strategic partners like Australia, South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines to create regional deterrence.

It does not, however, create a strong case for acting as if war might be inevitable and publicly focusing on somewhat arbitrary dates like 2027. Creating a stable structure of deterrence always requires real-world warfighting capability. At the same time, valid strategic triage provides an important warning. It will show that Taiwan is in some ways the opposite of a zero-sum game.

One also needs to be realistic about the cost-benefit of such a conflict. If such war does take place, the grand strategic result will almost certainly be the same, regardless of whether the United States wins, China wins, or the result is a stalemate. It will be a massive increase in the broader strategic confrontation between the United States and China. It will also be one that forces each nation several more percentage points of their GDP and that creates the risk of a far more serious war and more intense nuclear arms race. Both sides are more likely to lose in a broader grand strategic sense regardless of which major power “wins” over Taiwan and the Taiwanese are likely to lose even more.

## **Giving the Civil Side of Nation-Building the Same Grand Strategic Importance as Warfighting**

Another key lesson of the wars the United States has fought since 1945, is that United States has consistently treated the civil side of nation-building as a secondary or tertiary objective and to some extent as a near-irritant in the process of seeking military victories. It has never given nation-building at the civil and military level the same priority as military victory, and by doing so, it often made military victory “irrelevant.” As the previous historical survey has shown, the United States consistently failed to recognize that it could not achieve grand strategic success by using U.S. and allied forces to win battles. U.S. political rhetoric did sometimes emphasize nation-building but the was failure at both the civil and military level.

The United States did provide substantial financial aid for civil development and improvements in governance in most of its wars after 1945, but postwar studies of aid efforts in Vietnam and the work of SIGIR and SIGAR in studying aid in Iraq and Afghanistan, show that the United States provided highly erratic aid to ineffective and corrupt governments and did so in ways that both lacked effective planning and management and failed to set real-world conditions to ensure the honest and effective use of such aid.

While the situation differed in each war, the civil and military nation-building efforts were never properly integrated. While the United States did make some efforts to create integrated civil and military nation-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan—its most recent wars—a review of the resulting “plans” will show they did little more than set goals that never led to proper assessments of the challenges the United States faced to properly integrated the efforts by the Department of Defense, State and USAID, and produce detailed plans and efforts to assess the real-world levels of progress.

The United States did have successes in some kinds of civil aid—especially project aid, educational aid, and medical aid—but it consistently failed to properly assess the seriousness of the problems in host country governance and civil nation-building, and in understanding the degree to which the enemy could successfully exploit them in ways that offset U.S. tactical successes. It also confused efforts to create some kind of democratic process in the nation's central government with the ability to create a functional central government and the ability to create effective governance and security that could unite the country and win popular support on a broader or national level.

In almost every case, the United States failed to find forms of aid that could create a form of governance that could effectively address the host country's internal tensions and divisions and deal with critical limits in virtually every aspect of its day-to-day governance in ways that suited very different popular values and needs—which often varied sharply by faction and region.

These problems were further complicated by failed efforts to create a unified international effort to cooperate in planning the civil side of aid. No common effort was established in Iraq, and UNAMA politicized the aid process without creating effective plans or reporting systems. International conferences never properly addressed the problems in host country efforts, corruption, the challenges post by internal factions, and the gaps between goals and host-country promises and real-world progress. At the same time, international bodies like the IMF and World Bank failed to address many of the real-world problems in governance, national unity, and governance—although some in country work by World Bank's staff was a notable exception.

As a result, both the United States and its partners in the civil side of aid and nation-building failed to address the need for major reforms and improvement in governance that could meet regional and local needs and provide local security and an effective rule of law. The United States and its partners also relied on ineffective anticorruption efforts within the host-country government rather than on halting the flow of money to failed or corrupt efforts and forcing the departure or resignation of corrupt officials and contractors before the flow of aid was resumed.

More broadly, the previous figures show that the funding of aid efforts led to unstable programs and “boom and bust” flows of money that varied sharply by year. Military and civil U.S. staffing relied heavily on annual tours of duty. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States only created a hollow shell of meaningful civil-military plans, and they lacked effective audits and measure of effectiveness. In many cases, reporting progress in the civil side of nation-building was more of a liar's contest than a report on real progress, and the United States accepted host country claims of progress that were not based on valid data.

The war to liberate Kuwait, and the Ukraine has demonstrated that building up a *capable* strategic partner can have great strategic value. It is also clear that aid in both civil and military nation-building will often be a critical too in the growing civil-military competition with Russia and China, and in winning or keeping the support of strategic partners. It also is critical to understand that many partners will not be ideal, that many with major strategic value will not be functioning democracies, and the goal may often have to one of preserving the best option available, and accepting weak governments and economies, and regimes that has authoritarian characteristics. In many cases, nation-building must focus of weak regimes and level of national unity,

Here, however, it is equally important to exercise strategic triage and realize that the level of aid must be tailored to the probability and importance of success. If nation-building is essential to successful warfighting, but a security partnership or war optional in terms of vital American strategic interests, the United States should only make serious commitments to warfighting and aid when there is a significant probability of success and should be conditional on effective use of U.S. resources.

Failed states are failed states, and nations that fail in peace time, torn apart by civil conflict, or so divided that they cannot function, are all too common. The nation-building mission must be possible, and success must be credible. Military, civil, and humanitarian aid should be allocated on the basis of a nation's capability to use it effectively as well as its needs, and providing excessive funds, military supplies, and contractor support is an open invitation to corruption, waste, and the abuse of authority.

If one looks at America's wars since 1945, the United States consistently failed to understand the fact that effective nation-building might often be too difficult or impossible to achieve, or that it was likely to require a level of outside effort and resources—and acceptance of risks—that was too costly to attempt. If one examines the World Bank, IMF, UN and other international reporting, it is all too clear that something like a quarter of the world's states are fragile or failed cases where nation-building is so difficult that it may well be impossible. Accordingly, the United States must make a host country's ability to succeed in nation-building at cost-effective levels of U.S. aid a key precondition for supporting a country in any serious form of war.

## **Rethinking the Real-World Ability to Build Effective Host Country Forces**

The other side of this lesson about nation-building is that it is equally important for the United States to only commit combat forces to host countries that can create security forces that eventually can actually stand on their own. The outcome of the wars the United States has fought after 1945 has been heavily dependent on whether the United States could create effective host-country national security forces. The United States has only had moderate success during an actual war in one case: South Korea. And this was in a war that was far less technically sophisticated in terms of operations, weaponry, and technology than the wars that followed.

The United States had the shell of success in creating effective forces in Vietnam, where it could draw upon a relatively experienced officer corps and educated population, but where the military juntas that followed Diem created a force that suffered from serious corruption. These juntas also created a political climate where the conscription process encountered more and more resistance as time went on. Once the United States left Vietnam, it became clear all too clear that many Vietnamese forces had serious problems in sustaining and operating their more sophisticated U.S. weapons and systems and required major levels of U.S. military aid to survive.

Iraq had a sophisticated military when the United States invaded in 1991, and the United States was able to help build some effective units during its three wars in Iraq from 2003 onwards. However, the overall force building effort was a failure, and Iraq remained dependent on support from U.S. land and air forces. It suffered from a lack of qualified trainers, problems between Sunni and Shi'ite Arabs and Arab and Kurd, from Iraq's continuing dependence on a mix of Russian and European equipment, its problems in dealing with tribal and militia forces, and the lack of cohesive and effective Iraqi political leadership. Iraqi forces had also been heavily dependent on foreign support in maintaining their more sophisticated systems during the Iran-Iraq War and their successor forces became heavily dependent on embedded U.S. advisers and elite combat elements.

The failed Afghan force development effort provides an even broader set of warnings. As Figure 3 shows, there was only a limited initial effort to create effective Afghan military forces. U.S. and allied efforts focused on creating forces that were far too small to secure the country and on creating national military forces in country that was deeply divided in ethnic, tribal, and sectarian terms, and where popular support for the central government was mixed at best. It also made only limited efforts to ensure that the Afghan leaders of the force were competent, that corruption was limited, and progress reporting was honest, and there was a realistic assessment of the problems created by trying to transfer U.S. and aided force development concepts to a largely illiterate population.

The United States then belatedly rushed an Afghan force development effort as the Taliban recovered, and one whose recruiting base was heavily shaped by the fact that many recruits had no real incentive to join, or remain in the service, except that the army was the only job available. It set unrealistic goals for increasing the force, and the United States, and its allies pushed forward despite serious shortfalls in qualified trainers and short tours of duty—problems it never fully corrected.

As SIGAR reporting shows, there were serious problems with corruption at every level of the Afghan armed forces including its top command. The effort to rush the expansion of Afghan

forces was further complicated by a weak officer and NCO corps, and by a lack of education and literacy of much of the intake of new recruits.

The United States attempted to equip Afghan forces with systems and weapons that were far too sophisticated for them to operate on their own. As in Vietnam, Afghan forces remained overdependent on sophisticated equipment and contractor support, and they remained dependent on U.S. combat airpower and small number of elite U.S.-supported land combat units and advisors for any serious combat throughout the war.

The United States also failed—as it did in Vietnam—to honestly report on the progress being made to create effective combat forces. As was the case with key elements of civil aid, U.S. and NATO reporting on progress in building up Afghan capabilities also tended to be something of a liar's contest. As SIGAR reporting notes, the United States accepted reports of false progress and manning levels and repeated exaggerated Afghan claims of reform at the command level. Reporting also understated the deep internal ethnic and tribal divisions inside Afghan forces, and understated Taliban progress and success.

More broadly, the focus in using Afghan forces was largely on combat with Taliban forces, and not on effective local security and law enforcement. This meant that effort to create combat forces took precedence over the rule of law, and this compounded the already serious problems in Afghan governance and divisions between given Afghan tribal, ethnic, and sectarian forces.

It is also critical that anyone looking at the lessons of the Iraq and Afghan wars to understand that that these problems in creating host-country forces are likely to grow in any future war involving weak host-country forces as U.S. forces become more and more dependent on highly sophisticated weaponry and battle management systems, and on tactics based on joint all-domain warfare. As the war in the Ukraine has shown, these shifts will raise major security assistance challenges even for relatively sophisticated partner forces. Unless the United States gives far higher priority to developing training methods and cadres with expertise on given countries, weapons and equipment suitable for partner use, digital systems and communications equipment, and Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JAD/C2), and intelligence systems suitable for a range of different partners, it may well experience far great problems in military nation-building and joint operations in the future.

More broadly, the United States has also consistently failed to develop clear concepts for creating local security forces, police capable of performing paramilitary forces, and paramilitary forces, and has an inherently unworkable system that gives U.S. military forces potential responsibility when actively at war, but the State Department responsibility when official combat functions cease. The end result has been thus far too weak on effort in developing an effective rule of law and local security when the U.S. military is in charge, and either having state fail to perform the function or turn it over to contract personnel of distinctly uncertain quality.

At the same time, the United States tends to decouple its counterterrorism and counterextremism efforts from the need to reform host-country forces, many of which act far too extremely, carry out major human rights abuses, and needlessly alienate the population—particularly the factions with limited loyalty to the central government. As the annual State Department reports on human rights have made brutally clear since 2001, the end result has sometimes been to compound the problems in only treating the disease rather than the causes of terrorism, extremism and civil violence by making the treatment another cause of the disease.

In short, the United States may well indicate that it will need to be even more careful in exercising strategic triage in cases where the host country is dependent on U.S. force building both to fight and maintain any peace settlement.

## Putting the Lessons of Warfighting in the Right Grand Strategic Context

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, even the best effort to learn the lessons of America's recent wars needs to be kept in a broader strategic context. Ever since the former Soviet Union developed major nuclear forces, successful deterrence—not warfighting—has been the key to U.S. military security and grand strategy. This does, however, create a paradox in terms of learning the lessons of war. There is no successful grand strategic outcome to warfighting that results in mutual assured destruction, or that triggers the mutual ability of nations to escalate to levels of theater-wide conventional conflict that is so destructive that winning in some abstract military sense is far more costly to the winning side than not fighting or escalating.

At the same time, the last decade has made it all too clear that hopes that the world will somehow create a stable and peaceful global order remain far more illusory than real. Arms control has largely failed in spite of its successes following the fall of the Soviet Union. The United States and its strategic partners now compete in nuclear and conventional force modernization with Russia and China in ways that make preserving successful levels of nuclear deterrence, competition in advanced military and related civil technologies and deployed capabilities, far more important than the kind of wars that the United States has fought since 1945—*as well as deterring the escalation of such conflicts to unacceptable levels.*

The United States and its strategic partners are now engaged in global civil-military competition for power and influence with the former Soviet Union where they are fighting a proxy war in Ukraine and an economic and technological race that is the equivalent of an arms race with China. Calling this competition a “New Cold War” ignores the reality that competition for global influence and political and economic power was at least as important in grand strategic terms as competition in building military force and alliances from 1945 to the present, and that use foreign aid and security assistance effectively was far important in achieving U.S. success in actual warfighting.

This global civil-military competition now includes both Russia and China. The threat from China already involves a far larger economy and level of military spending than the threat from Russia, and China may well emerge as a peer competitor in both military and civil terms—rivaling or surpassing the United States in terms of economic strength and both civil and military technology.

It is also clear from China's successes to date—and Russia's civil weaknesses—that China may possibly win decisively at the civil level without ever engaging in a major military conflict of the kind that occurred in World War I and World War II. Moreover, success in deterrence may make success in the growing levels of civil competition steadily more important than competition at the military level.

From a grand strategic viewpoint, learning the best ways to succeed in this form of civil and military competition is already far more important in grand strategic terms—and in preserving successful levels of deterrence—than learning the lessons of the wars the United States has fought since 1945—as important as learning such lessons may be.

The most important U.S. grand strategic successes from 1945 onwards have been dependent on the ability of the United States and its major strategic partners to gain civil and military influence and create additional partnerships with developing nations—particularly as colonialism came to

an end and virtually all nations became fully independent. Once again, this competition was both civil and military and far more important in grand strategic terms than the military outcome of any of the wars the United States fought from 1945 onwards.

U.S. national strategy now tends to understate the importance of such competition. U.S. strategy focuses on preserving a rules-based order that never really existed on a global level and that has become far less global with the emergence of China as a superpower and Putin's rule in Russia. It also focuses on extended deterrence primarily in terms of deterring China and Russia and smaller hostile states like Iran and North Korea.

Current U.S. strategy documents understate the grand strategic importance of preserving strategic civil and military partnerships with Europe and NATO and key allies in Asia. The same is true of a need to create strong relations and partnerships with the more successful developing states in Asia, Africa, and Latin America on a global level—efforts that can often succeed in giving them address security and stability with limited levels of security assistance and economic aid.

Maintaining a strong U.S. global presence is not a grand strategic sideshow--particularly given the competition exemplified by China's "belt and road" programs, and Russian efforts to gain strategic influence and deploy military forces to perform "spoiler" roles in nations like Syria and Libya. The United States cannot maintain its current level of grand strategic success by ignoring the extent to which many poorer states now fail in terms of governance and development, are divided into hostile and sometime violent factions, and are being shaped by terrorism, extremism and/or repressive and aggressive authoritarian leaders.

The United States cannot succeed in being the world's policeman or in nation-building on a global level. It has shown, however, that it can have significant successes on a global level by helping the more successful countries and play a major role in helping fragile states when they have political structures that offer a major opportunity for progress. Put simply, the lessons to be learned from U.S. successes and failures in such efforts since 1945 are cumulatively far more important than the lessons of its wars.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> See Barbara W. Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China: 1911–1945*, reprint ed. (New York: Random House, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> For a short history of Wedemeyer's role in China see "Albert Coady Wedemeyer, United States general and statesman," Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Albert-Coady-Wedemeyer>.

<sup>3</sup> See Francis Eugene Jones, "United States Relations with Chiang Kai-Shek, 1937–1949" (master's thesis, Fort Hays Kansas State College, 1962), 739, <http://doi.org/10.58809/YOPZ5417>.

<sup>4</sup> An unclassified CIA analysis of U.S. intelligence failures in providing warning that North Korea would attack and that China would intervene if North Korea was defeated following U.S. intervention, is provided in P.K. Rose, "Two Strategic Intelligence Mistakes in Korea, 1950, Perceptions and Reality," *Studies in Intelligence* (Fall-Winter 2001), <https://www.cia.gov/static/ddc18b8ca37cf9ca4b7c52f13f5a680d/two-strategic-intel-mistakes.pdf>. This analysis does not, however, address the details of U.S. intelligence on China's military role in North Korea before the war and focuses on Russia's role before China intervened in the conflict. It is clear, however, that Chinese officers and forces did play a significant military role in North Korea before it invaded the South.

<sup>5</sup> Estimates differ. For a good quick overview of these events and the war, see the summary in the Wikipedia version of "Korean War" available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_War).

<sup>6</sup> See T.R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness* (Macmillan, 1963); and T.S. Allen and Jackson Perry, *Task Force Smith and the Problem with Readiness*, Modern War Institute, July 17, 2020, <https://mwi.usma.edu/task-force-smith-and-the-problem-with-readiness/>.

<sup>7</sup> See P.K. Rose, "Two Strategic Intelligence Mistakes in Korea, 1950, Perceptions and Reality," *Studies in Intelligence*, Fall-Winter 2001, <https://www.cia.gov/static/ddc18b8ca37cf9ca4b7c52f13f5a680d/two-strategic-intel-mistakes.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> "Korean War," Dwight G. Eisenhower Presidential Library, <https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/research/online-documents/korean-war>; "Korean Armistice Agreement," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean\\_Armistice\\_Agreement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Korean_Armistice_Agreement).

<sup>9</sup> The history of the conflict is controversial, and this instant summary is no substitute for consulting the official histories of the war that are relatively neutral and far more detailed. For a quick overview of the escalation of the U.S. role in the war, see "Vietnam War," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnam_War).

<sup>10</sup> Lt. Commander Pat Paterson, "The Truth about Tonkin," *Naval History Magazine* 22, no. 1 (February 2008), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/naval-history-magazine/2008/february/truth-about-tonkin>. Also see Colonel H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*, reprint ed. (Harper Perennial, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> For a relatively objective quick summary, see "Pentagon Papers," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pentagon\\_Papers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pentagon_Papers). This coverage ends in 1968. A full review of public reporting on U.S. policy decisions, progress in the ARVN, and the military balance after U.S. departure would show even less reliable reports of progress that did not actually take place.

<sup>12</sup> As is the case with every conflict listed here, this history is highly complex, and very controversial. Jeffery J. Clarke's *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S Army, 1988), is a book that address many of the issues in creating an effective ARVN in depth.

<sup>13</sup> See J. Travis Moger, "The Race for Kuwait, Operation Vigilant Warrior October–December 1994," *Army History* no. 115 (Spring 2020): 6–19, [https://history.army.mil/armyhstory/AH-Magazine/2020AH\\_spring/AH115.pdf](https://history.army.mil/armyhstory/AH-Magazine/2020AH_spring/AH115.pdf); and "Operation Vigilant Warrior," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Vigilant\\_Warrior](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Vigilant_Warrior).

<sup>14</sup> See "Operation Vigilant Warrior," Wikipedia and "Iraqi No-Fly Zones Conflict," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraqi\\_no-fly\\_zones\\_conflict](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraqi_no-fly_zones_conflict).

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed military analysis of the 2003 war and its aftermath, see Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Iraq War: Strategy, Tactics, and Military Lessons* (Praeger, 2003), <https://www.amazon.com/Iraq-War-Strategy-Tactics->

---

[Military/dp/0275982270](#). For a more detailed analysis of the failures in U.S. strategy that followed, see Anthony H. Cordesman and Grace Hwang, *The New Strategic Dialogue: Shaping the Future Iraqi-U.S. Relationship* (Washington, DC, CSIS, June 2020), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-strategic-dialogue-shaping-iraqi-us-relationship>.

<sup>16</sup> “2003–2011: The Iraq War,” Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/iraq-war>.

<sup>17</sup> For a full assessment of the failures in nation-building and the development of **Iraq** from the time of Saddam Hussein through 2023, see Anthony H. Cordesman, *Giving Iraq Stability and Progress: Treat the Causes of Iraq's Governance and Development “Disease,” Rather Than Focusing on Its Violent “Symptoms* (Washington, DC: CSIS, April 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/giving-iraq-stability-and-progress-treat-causes-iraqs-governance-and-development-disease>.

<sup>18</sup> This capsule summary omits most of the details of the campaigns involved and problems in the U.S. effort. The reports of the Special Inspector General for Iraqi Reconstruction address many of the more detailed problems in the U.S. effort.

<sup>19</sup> See the full range of SIGIR reports at <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc270765/> and its final report at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA587236>.

<sup>20</sup> Cordesman, *Giving Iraq Stability and Progress: Treat the Causes of Iraq's Governance and Development “Disease,” Rather Than Focusing on Its Violent “Symptoms.”*

<sup>21</sup> “1999-2021 The U.S. War in Afghanistan,” Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-war-afghanistan>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> SIGAR reports that the U.S. government reporting to SIGAR has substantial gaps. Figure Two shows both this cycle, and the almost incredible level of instability in key areas of spending—many of which the reporting by SIGAR shows had now consistent or coherent planning, and where the short annual duty cycles and competition for resources from Iraq meant that—like Vietnam—every year of U.S. effort became another “first year” of the war.” It also reports that “A nongovernmental estimate of U.S. costs for the 20-year war in Afghanistan stands at more than double DOD's calculation. “The Costs of War Project sponsored by the Watson Institute at Brown University issued a report, U.S. Costs to Date for the War in Afghanistan, 2001–2021, putting total costs at \$2.26 trillion.<sup>14</sup> The Watson Institute's independently produced report builds on DOD's \$933 billion Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) budgets and State's \$59 billion OCO budgets for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Unlike the DOD Cost of War Report, the Watson report adds what it considers to be Afghanistan-related costs of \$433 billion above DOD baseline costs, \$296 billion in medical and dis-ability costs for veterans, and \$530 billion in interest costs on related Treasury borrowing.” Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Quarterly Report to U.S. Congress* (SIGAR, April 2023), 32, 34, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2023-04-30qr.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> See the various SIGAR reports on the Lessons of the Afghan War. For example, SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghan Reconstruction* (SIGAR, August 2021), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>; SIGAR, *Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed* (SIGAR, February 2023), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-16-IP.pdf>; SIGAR, *Police in Conflict: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* (SIGAR, June 2022), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-22-23-LL.pdf>; SIGAR, *Why the Afghan Government Collapsed* (SIGAR, November 2022), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-23-05-IP.pdf>; and SIGAR, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An Assessment of the Factors That led to Its Demise* (SIGAR, May 2022, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/evaluations/SIGAR-22-22-IP.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> These issues, along with the other lessons of the war in Afghanistan, are examined in detail in Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Lessons of the Afghan War That No One Will Want to Learn* (Washington, DC: CSIS, June 2002), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/lessons-afghan-war-no-one-will-want-learn>.

<sup>28</sup> For an excellent history of the fighting and these issues. See Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021),

---

<sup>29</sup> Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr. one of the leading U.S. experts on the Vietnam War, quotes a conversation with a North Vietnamese officer in his book *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context*, where Summers began the exchange by stating that, “‘You know you never defeated us on the battlefield.’ The Vietnamese officer replied by stating “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.” See Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (2022).

<sup>30</sup> For the text of the peace agreement and its official presentation, see “Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, U.S. State Department, February 2, 2020,” State Department, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>; and “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America February 29, 2020 Which Corresponds to Rajab 5, 1441 on the Hijri Lunar Calendar and Hoot 10, 1398 on the Hijri Solar Calendar, February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> See Hans J. Morgenthau, “National Interest and Moral Principles in Foreign Policy: The Primacy of the National Interest,” *The American Scholar* 18, no. 2, (Spring 1949), 207–12, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41205156>; and Hans J. Morgenthau, “The Mainsprings of American Foreign Policy: The National Interest vs. Moral Abstractions,” *The American Political Science Review* 44, no. 4 (December 1950), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1951286>.