Learning from the War: "Who Lost Afghanistan?" versus Learning "Why We Lost"

By Anthony H. Cordesman

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Please provide comments to acordesman@gmail.com

Photo: BEHROUZ MEHRI/AFP/Getty Images
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Anthony H. Cordesman

It does not take much vision to predict that the collapse of the present Afghan government is now all too likely, and that if the current Afghan central government collapses, a partisan U.S. political battle over who lost Afghanistan will follow. It is also nearly certain that any such partisan battle will become part of a bitter mid-term 2022 election. It takes equally little vision to foresee that any such partisan political debate will be largely dishonest and focus on blaming the opposing party. “Dishonesty” seems to be the growing definition of American political dialogue.

It is possible that neither party will really want to debate the collapse and the loss of the war. However, it seems all too likely that the debate will focus on Democrats blaming President Trump and Republicans blaming President Biden.

The Democratic Party argument will be that the Trump administration horribly mismanaged the initial peace agreement it signed on February 22, 2020. The argument will be that the February agreement traded withdrawal for negotiations, but that it never defined a possible peace and never created an effective peace process, and in doing so, effectively “lost” Afghanistan by defining a date for U.S. withdrawal in 14 months: May 1, 2020. Democrats will claim this agreement led to major U.S. withdrawals and Afghan political turmoil before the Biden Administration took office, making the “loss” of Afghanistan inevitable.

The Republican Party argument will reference the troop withdrawals that took place under the Obama Administration, skip over the withdrawal deadlines and actions of the Trump Administration, and focus on the withdrawals and closings that began after Biden’s inauguration on January 20, 2020. It will focus on President Biden’s new deadline of September 11, 2021, and on his statement on April 14, 2021 that, “We achieved those objectives. Bin Laden is dead and al-Qaeda is degraded in Afghanistan, and it’s time to end this forever war.”

Fortunately, it seems unlikely that any such “who lost the war” debate will go on much longer than the mid-term election or that it will come close to the low-level debate over “who lost Vietnam” that went on until Henry Kissinger suddenly found “red” China was a convenient strategic partner. Like Vietnam, it will be easier to forget, move on to other issues and potential successes, and quietly write the war off.

There should, however, be a far more serious effort to examine the history of the war and the lessons the U.S. and its allies should learn. This effort should examine the full range of civil lessons as well as the military lessons that emerged from the entire history of the war – and not simply focus on its end. It should address the fact that the losses in the war were driven as much by failures in nation building and the civil sectors as from the failures in combat. It should acknowledge that the Afghan War – like Vietnam and the two sequential wars the U.S. fought after 2003 in Iraq – were counterinsurgency campaigns and not wars against international terrorism.

And, it should consider the war’s costs, and whether its strategic cost at any given point was worth prolonging it – and the lack of effective strategic triage that took two decades to cause the full U.S. withdrawal from the fighting.

This analysis explores these issues in depth, and it attempts to highlight the issues that must be addressed to learn the full range of lessons from the war. It is a thought piece, deliberately
controversial, and written with the full understanding that many key aspects of the war remain classified or have not been addressed in open source reporting. It is also written with the understanding that “war fatigue” has set in at every level in the United States. At the same time, it does not take much vision to see how many troubled states – and fragile or failed governments – will shape America’s strategic interests in the near future, and that much of the competition with China, Russia, and regional threats like Iran will occur in gray area conflicts and power struggles that are all too similar to the problems the U.S. has faced in Afghanistan.

It concludes by raising a different issue that may in many ways be more important than learning the lessons of the war. If one examines the cost of the war and the lack of any clear or consistent strategic rationale for continuing it, then it is far from clear that the U.S. should ever have committed the resources to the conflict that it did or that it had the grand strategic priority to justify two decades of conflict.

The key issue is not why the war was lost, it is whether letting it escalate and prolonging it was worth its cost. The examination of the civil and military challenges as well as the mistakes is the central focus of this analysis and, to some extent, a warning that the United States needs a far more realistic approach to “strategic triage.” Like the Iraq War, the U.S. needs to be far more careful in deciding if a conflict is worth fighting, escalating, and continuing.
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THE MILITARY SIDE OF THE “HOLE IN GOVERNMENT;” STRATEGIC JINGOISM; AND LACK OF PLANNING, EFFECTIVENESS MEASURES, AND CONDITIONALITY.

THE NEED FOR STRATEGIC TRIAGE
Learning from Why the War Was Not Won

In any case, trying to find some one person or group to blame for losing a twenty-year-long war is, at best, an exercise in political hypocrisy. The key issues have nothing to do with “who lost the war.” They are why the war ended with so many Taliban gains, what lessons need to be drawn, and how the U.S. can act more effectively in the future. A valid analysis will also have to look at the entire course of the war, each major decision or action that limited the chances of victory over a twenty-year period, and their cumulative consequences – rather than focusing on the final years and months of U.S. withdrawal.

An honest effort to examine why the war was lost must focus on the war’s entire history and not the period from the February 2020 peace agreement and its 14-month deadline for withdrawal; the Biden announcement on April 13, 2021; Biden’s later announcement of a full U.S. withdrawal by September 11, 2021; and the outcome of the U.S. force cuts, Taliban offensives, and the actions of the Afghan “Ghani” or central government that followed.

An honest effort will have to examine the full range of data and reporting from the start of the war to its end, and it will need to actively challenge the integrity of the open source data that shaped political and public opinion and of the full range of classified data and intelligence. It will have to examine the steady rise in the over-classification of key data that has already been flagged in SIGAR reporting to Congress. It will have to honestly assess the steady decline in the integrity and content of the reporting by U.S. official military spokespersons and the degree to which the State Department and USAID gradually ceased to provide any meaningful open source assessments of civil progress and problems.

At the same time, any such effort should consider the lack of any lasting impact from past U.S. efforts to act on the lessons of war. There is probably no worse way for a democracy to learn from the past than by assigning partisan blame; searching for individual scapegoats; or attempting to create “lessons” to advocate given projects, reforms, and spending efforts. The inability to actually recover all of the key data will also present critical problems – especially when a war is not going well and when more and more data are classified, other data cease to be gathered and analyzed, and certain key data are only circulated on a sensitive and perishable basis.

Far too many of the open source reporting during the last nine years of the war have been exercises in creating meaningless categories of reporting, making unsubstantiated claims, and lying by omission. In fact, the need for honesty and full transparency once things begin to go wrong may well be a key lesson of the war.

As the Quarterly Reports to Congress by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and the Lead Inspector General (LIG) make all too clear, far too much of the reporting on the Afghan War became the equivalent of a public affairs liar’s contest from 2011 onwards, and especially after major troop cuts began in 2014. Worse, in the case of many of the reports on civil progress – or the lack of it – regularly detailed open source reporting by the State Department and USAID on civil developments simply stopped. As anyone who has served in government knows, lying by omission is not only easier, it is often more effective.
Looking at First (and Continuing) Causes: Blundering into the Wrong Kind of “Nation Building”

If such an analysis is to have meaning, it will also have to focus on both the civil and military reasons as to why the war was not won, rather than to focus only on the fighting and the military dimension. It will have to consider the full range of civil-military challenges the U.S., its allies, and the Afghan government face relative to the problems that the Taliban and hostile extremists faced, rather than focus on U.S. actions.

As will be discussed shortly, there were many aspects of the security effort that helped to lead to failure. In retrospect, however, at least half the failures were “civil,” and many were the result of failures in nation building for which the U.S. must take responsibility. The U.S. played a critical role in two decades worth of failures in aid efforts and in shaping failures in Afghan civil governance that did as much to lose the war as from the flaws of outside military support and the erratic and ill-formed efforts to build effective Afghan forces.

**Once the U.S. Arrived in Afghanistan, It Had to “Nation Build”**

Here, to put it bluntly, President Biden reached a Trumpian level of dishonesty in the explanation he gave for America’s withdrawal from Afghanistan on July 8, 2021:

We did not go to Afghanistan to nation-build. And it’s the right and the responsibility of the Afghan people alone to decide their future and how they want to run their country.

Together, with our NATO Allies and partners, we have trained and equipped over three hu- — nearly 300,000 current serving members of the military — of the Afghan National Security Force, and many beyond that who are no longer serving. Add to that, hundreds of thousands more Afghan National Defense and Security Forces trained over the last two decades.

We provided our Afghan partners with all the tools — let me emphasize: all the tools, training, and equipment of any modern military. We provided advanced weaponry. And we’re going to continue to provide funding and equipment. And we’ll ensure they have the capacity to maintain their air force.

But most critically, as I stressed in my meeting just two weeks ago with President Ghani and Chairman Abdullah, Afghan leaders have to come together and drive toward a future that the Afghan people want and they deserve. (https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan/)

The U.S. was deeply involved in nation building from the start – in fact President Bush announced a Marshall Plan for Afghanistan at a speech at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) in April 2002. America’s failures to effectively implement such a plan probably did as much to determine the outcome of the war as the failures of the Afghan civil government that the President does correctly highlight.

There also is no question that American military failures were also significant, and that the U.S. and its allies did not pursue a consistent or effective effort to create the Afghan national security forces that Afghans needed to stand on their own and win a growing counterinsurgency conflict with the Taliban. Both America’s civil and military efforts – and their impact on the efforts of America’s allies and Afghan national security efforts – failed in different ways over a period of two decades, and they failed consistently although in many different ways as time went on. No honest assessment of the war can ignore the fact that every U.S. Administration involved made serious mistakes.
Nation building began as soon as the Taliban suffered its major initial defeats in 2001. The U.S. played a critical role in helping to set up the Afghan Interim Administration or Authority (AIA) that governed the country from December 22, 2001 to July 13, 2002. The U.S. played a major indirect role in every Afghan election that followed; in shaping the aid to the Afghan budget that helped to shape its formation as a state; in advising on what might be described politely as its “failed” constitution in 2004; in pressing President Karzai, and in the long series of crises between President Ghani, Abdullah Abdullah, and other Afghan leaders from Ghani’s first election on September 20, 2014 to the present.

At the same time, there is little to be gained from debating whether the U.S. should have reacted to 9/11 with some form of civil intervention. Some form of effort to react to 9/11 by seeking to destroy al-Qaeda and defeat the Taliban once the Taliban refused to arrest and expel its leaders and members was almost inevitable. The initial cost of doing so was also limited. A small number of U.S. forces and intelligence personnel effectively shattered the Taliban and reduced al-Qaeda in Afghanistan into small, scattered cadres. U.S. and allied forces were able to easily occupy most of the country, and most of Afghanistan’s neighbors were initially helpful or pressured into being supportive.

The moment the Taliban was largely driven from the field – from late 2001 onwards – the U.S. was confronted with the need for some form of nation building. There also were only very uncertain Afghan options at best. There was no clear political or governance alternative to the Taliban, other than the same divided warlords and power brokers that had led to the rise of the Taliban in the first place. There were no alternative national security forces; no alternative justice system; and no alternative civil structure that could create a stable pattern of civil government services, infrastructure, and economic development.

The U.S. was immediately confronted by the fact that any Afghan governance and power structures that emerged on its own would have massive problems in properly governing, providing security, and meeting the needs of the Afghan people. Accepting an Afghan solution to Afghanistan’s problems in replacing the Taliban could easily have meant repeating all of the failures in governance and security, internal conflicts, and tragedies that had occurred in the eight years of fighting and turmoil between the overthrow of Najibullah in April 1992 and the fall of the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate in December 2001.

In spite of some recent official denials, these realities – and to some extent the relative ease of the initial effort to “defeat” the Taliban and push it out of power in most of the country – led the U.S. to choose an aggressive form of “nation building” and attempt to remake Afghanistan. It also did so in a series of individual efforts that lacked overall coordination, any serious overall planning, and continuity of effort from late 2001 onwards. Real progress was made in many individual areas, but not on a national basis – and largely in the form of sporadic efforts whose problems and failures led to serious failures over time, and eventually did much to trigger the full U.S. withdrawal.

**Failing to Create Effective Civil Systems**

In fairness, failures may have been nearly inevitable. Most peaceful nation building efforts since the end of World War II have had limited success and many have largely failed. Reassuring plans and rhetoric have generally gone unimplemented. More democracies and justice systems have collapsed than survived, and few “developing” nations have developed at anything like the pace they need. Various forms of more authoritarian rule have done no better, and many have done worse.
The U.S. was also poorly prepared for the task. It had comparatively little experience in real-world nation building since Vietnam, aside from some minor efforts in Latin America. Both in Afghanistan – and later in Iraq – it put idealism and good intentions before any serious effort at risk assessment and judging the probabilities of success in transforming one of the least developed and dysfunctional political structures in the world. In retrospect, openly trying to build a new regime around Afghanistan’s warlords and power brokers may have fit its society and culture better than efforts to transform the state, but nothing about their history before or after 2002 inspired much confidence.

This almost inevitably led the U.S. – and its allies into expanding into more aggressive forms of nation-building and into trying to remake many aspects of Afghanistan in a Western image as quickly as possible. In fairness, these efforts also had the initial and continued support of many educated, urban Afghans and exiles. They too attempted to achieve more democratic forms of government, more effective rules of law, and efforts to develop a more modern economy.

The practical problem was the lack of U.S., allied, and Afghan capacity to create practical systems that could actually implement such changes and reforms. While there were different cycles of failure over time, an objective analysis of Afghan civil development over the last twenty years is almost certain to reveal:

- A lack of competent and experienced political leadership as well as the existing factional differences by region, ethnicity, section, and tribe that made politics and governance a constant exercise in dealing with competing power brokers and warlords.
- Instituting a representative government without a functioning and honest electoral system, direct election of representatives from given Districts, and giving the President de facto control over spending and appointments.
- Creating a system of government and a civil economy whose funding depended largely on outside aid, without providing adequate fiscal controls and management or adequate planning and effectiveness measures, and that tolerated massive levels of corruption.
- Reliance on ineffective anti-corruption efforts instead of donor “conditionality” and willingness to halt funding when corruption or mismanagement/waste reached high levels, when money was used to support given political factions and power brokers, or when project/programs clearly lacked adequate planning.
- High levels of largely annual rotations of key foreign aid personnel and advisors.
- Splitting responsibilities for managing aid by region between donor countries, while assigning the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) an ambitious country-wide aid planning and coordination role it could not perform.
- Lack of coordination between the civil aid and military efforts that varied by country, coupled to a lack of integration of civil-military development plans and particularly plans that reflected the different interest of given regions, factions, and Districts.
- Creating a long series of ambitious economic, governance, and legal system reform plans that were not effectively implemented, substituting pledges of reform for performance.
- Wasting major resources on efforts to developing mining and pipelines as well as a ring road and “new Silk Road” without adequate security that were based on justifications and analyses that were grossly over-optimistic.
- Steadily shifting to “top down” central efforts at nation building, and failing to deal with the different priorities, tensions, and needs of given Districts and Provinces.
- Letting the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) linked to the military become largely a way of using aid money to obtain support for tactical military objectives.
• Steadily losing effective governance, law enforcement, and security at the District level and outside urban areas, along with security for roads and lines of communication after 2011. In many cases, the Taliban established check points and control points on roads supposedly under government control, and then they gradually and effectively took control.

• Reliance on expensive failed counter-drug programs as narcotics grew to become a key source of civil earnings in an economy that was otherwise heavily dependent on outside aid.

• Failing to tie claims of social progress to honest reporting systems and assessments of real-world progress, and steadily cutting back on open source reporting as the Taliban gained power and influence while the initial rates of progress slowed or reversed.

• Focusing on project aid, rather than political and economic stability.

• Training elements of a modern civil service with uncertain allocation to jobs, and salary levels that were often too low to avoid making officials dependent on some form of corruption.

• Failing to create enough market-oriented jobs and employment, particularly in urban areas, and creating major increases in poverty levels from 2011 onwards.

• Failing to create an effective system for appointing honest and effective officials at the District and Provincial level.

Many of these failures were beyond U.S. control and were driven by Afghanistan’s sheer backwardness in virtually every level of governance and overall national development, its lack of effective military and security forces tied to the government, its lack of effective police and justice systems at the local level, its reliance on surviving power brokers and warlords, its internal ethnic and tribal tensions, and its lack of any solid structure to build-upon.

In retrospect, some were also driven by the lack of Afghan, U.S., and other outside competence to draft an effective constitution in 2004, and to set meaningful aid goals for such a different society. As recent history has demonstrated all too often, the fact that a state has failed from within does not mean it is practical for foreigners and exiles to “fix it” and transform it from the outside.

At the same time, it is not clear what a less ambitious effort that accepted a far more “Afghan” form of government could have done. The years of civil war that broke out after the fall of Najibullah in April 1992 had after all led to the birth of the Taliban and given it control over most of the country by 2001. The warlords and power brokers that survive the Taliban’s fall were largely the same figures that had helped to create it.

“Turbulence”: Flooding in Aid Money and Then Slashing It

It is also important to note that the United States did not begin its nation building efforts by focusing on the military. If the flow of aid money is examined in detail, it initially devoted substantial equal resources to both the need for effective civil governance and development as well as the need to create effective Afghan security forces, and it poured steadily greater resources into these efforts through its FY2011 fiscal year – although usually with limited planning, fiscal controls, effectiveness measures, and continuity.

These patterns in the U.S. civil and military aid efforts – which had major additional support from America’s allies – are shown in Figure One and Figure Two. While such aid dropped precipitously after FY2012, serious spending continued through FY2021. As of March 31, 2021, the United States government had appropriated – or otherwise made available – approximately $144.40 billion in funds for reconstruction and related activities in Afghanistan since FY 2002.
The U.S. did, however, steadily spend far more on Afghan military forces than civil development, and its aid efforts became steadily more military over time. SIGAR estimates that total Afghanistan reconstruction funding was allocated as follows by March 2021:

- $88.32 billion for security (including $4.60 billion for counternarcotics initiatives)
- $36.03 billion for governance and development (including $4.37 billion for counternarcotics initiatives)
- $4.14 billion for humanitarian aid, and
- $15.91 billion for agency operations

As Figure Two shows, total U.S. spending by major category was erratic, and it often suddenly swooped up and down from year to year. The overall spending patterns in each major category from 2002 to the present also resembled mountain ranges, rather than the steady flow that results from well-managed resource allocation. SIGAR’s more detailed Quarterly Reports to Congress, and other official open sources, show radical increases through 2021 – partly driven by the resurgence of the Taliban – but then reflect an erratic implosion of different spending cuts after that date. This level of turbulence makes it clear at the grossest possible level that there was no consistent plan or level of effort in any major category of aid – something that will become far more clear when the full range of U.S. and other documents that supposedly reflected integrated civil-military plans and efforts at effective planning, programming, and budgeting becomes publicly available.

As noted earlier, there was no serious U.S. effort at making the flow of aid conditional and to tie the flow of aid to honest and effective civil and military efforts. The Afghan government made repeated promises to improve its level of governance and fight corruption, but it failed to reign in levels of corruption and massive waste. The U.S., other states, and UNAMA exercised minimal financial control over the flow of aid, did not properly measure the effectiveness of spending and key projects, and demonstrated a growing U.S. tendency after 2011 to claim civil and military progress that did not take place.

At the same time, the cuts in counter narcotics funding in Figure Two reflect the fact that efforts to control the Afghan narcotics industry effectively collapsed, and one ambitious aid conference after another made promises that were never kept – creating some elements of a narcostate that impacted heavily on both the civil and security sectors. In most countries, this would be a minor factor. In Afghanistan, narcotics are the one major export and “industry.”
Figure One: SIGAR Estimate of U.S. Reconstruction Aid and Cost of the Afghan War from FY2002 to FY2022 in Current $U.S. Billions

CUMULATIVE APPROPRIATIONS BY FUNDING CATEGORY AS OF MARCH 31, 2021 ($ BILLIONS)

U.S. APPROPRIATIONS SUPPORTING AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION EFFORTS ($ BILLIONS)

EIGHT LARGEST ACTIVE RECONSTRUCTION ACCOUNTS – $120.01 BILLION

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OTHER RECONSTRUCTION ACCOUNTS – $8.48 BILLION

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AGENCY OPERATIONS – $15.91 BILLION

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TOTAL AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION – $144.40 BILLION

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Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, First Quarter 2021, pp. 31, 32.
Figure Two: SIGAR Estimate of U.S. Reconstruction Aid and Cost of the Afghan War from FY2022 to FY2022 in Current $U.S. Billions

Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, First Quarter 2021, pp. 36-45.
The “Hole in Government;” Strategic Jingoism; and Lack of Planning, Effectiveness Measures, and Conditionality

There also were major problems in the ways in which the U.S. approached both civil and military aid that became a steadily critical reason why the war was lost over a twenty-year period – although they are problems that cannot be blamed on any given U.S. Administration or political party.

There was never any coherent U.S. or overall plan for civil or military development. The actual allocation and implementation of all forms of aid not only tended to vary sharply by year, but there was never even a U.S. plan that attempted to tie to together all the elements of aid – especially civil aid. There were U.S. exercises in creating coordinated civil-military plans, but they were largely hollow shells.

The exercises set goals and described good intentions, but they were not real plans in the sense they were tied to practical specifics or made into serious management tools. They did not provide a meaningful set of overall plans, programs, budgets, implementation schedules, and measures of effectiveness. There was no mechanism for regular reviewing and updating, and there was no continuing staff to give them continuity and ensure they would have real impact.

The aid efforts, shown in projects or programs, were driven by staffs that largely operated on the basis of one-year assignments. There was no real “whole of government” approach. Just a series of “holes in government” approaches that were separately managed by given elements of State, USAID, and the Department of Defense as well as by separate and constantly rotating staffs in the embassy and the field. There also was pressure to spend but limited pressure to manage money, make its allocation conditional on honest spending, and actually measure effectiveness.

Civil aid planning and management – like the U.S. approaches to military aid planning – were also to some extent exercises in “strategic jingoism.” U.S. reviews of civil aid focused on U.S. aid efforts, and they often failed to mention the efforts of other countries. They did not integrate allied, international, and aid efforts into a planning, programming, and budgeting process (PPB), and they often did not consider what other countries were doing – although individual allied countries played a major role in shaping the aid activities in major regions of Afghanistan, UNAMA was supposed to coordinate all civil aid, and a long series of donor conferences with the Afghan government supposedly set key goals for aid and funding as well as ways to meet them.

As is discussed later, there was no real effort to make aid conditional and to ensure that it only flowed when the Afghan government used it effectively, used it where it was supposed to be spend, and kept corruption to reasonable levels. As SIGAR has made all too clear in its reports to Congress, there was a similar lack of effective planning, programming, and budgeting – and effective fiscal management – in dealing with foreign and U.S. contractors – compounding the problems in ensuring that aid was used effectively and with minimal corruption.

This was compounded by the failure to fully integrate and assess non-U.S. aid levels and the impact of the different ways in which donor countries planned and managed their aid efforts. “Strategic jingoism” was applied as much to most aspects of the management and spending in aid as it did to planning and coordination of given aid efforts.
The Threat to Afghanistan from the Afghan Central Government

It is always tempting to focus on the military dimension of a war, but this all too often means that analysts do not place proper emphasis on the civil causes of victory or defeat. The U.S. did not spend twenty years fighting terrorism in Afghanistan. Even by the end of 2001, the war had ceased to be a war against terrorism and became a struggle to create a viable state. By 2002, the fighting had ceased to be a fight against al-Qaeda and international terrorism, and it was becoming a fight against a Taliban insurgency, although the Taliban did not make serious gains for several more years.

Civil Failures Became a Critical Part of War Fighting

This made civil failures a critical part of war fighting and also a critical aspect of counterinsurgency campaigns that the U.S. consistently tended to underestimate. Strong opposition movements and insurgencies do not arise or recover without cause. They are not the part of some mysterious process that shapes “hearts and minds,” but they are failures in politics, governance, and economics – often driven by ideology, religion, ethnicity, sect, and tribe.

It is a grim reality in far too many U.S. counterinsurgency campaigns’ end results are that the U.S. military is tasked with trying to support a failed leadership and system of governance that fails to properly support – and instead often abuses – a major part of the population. Even if one ignores outside powers, the U.S. faces at least three enemies in its counterinsurgency efforts, not just one. The first is the hostile force the U.S. attempts to defeat. The second enemy is the failures and weaknesses of the government the U.S. is seeking to aid. And, the third is the inability of the United States to fully understand these challenges in the context of another country’s culture and political system.

If one looks for the causes of the Taliban’s recovery and its gradual defeat of the Afghan central government in much of the Afghan countryside, the key cause is that the government in Kabul was in many ways its own worst enemy at both the civil and military levels – alongside its corruption, lack of focus on the needs of the Afghan people, factionalism, and power brokering.

The image of civil progress was always better than the reality in the field. There were many well-educated and well-intentioned Afghans that tried to serve their country, but this did not mean they were capable of becoming popular leaders, governing and developing the country, or dealing with the nation’s political realities. Moreover, the U.S. stopped open source reporting on progress by District in March 2010, as the rise in Taliban activity and problems in popular support for the District governments began to rise in way that could no longer be ignored. The data involved are not fully explained, but Figure Three shows the last detailed open source map of the trends by District – and no open source update was then provided.
Figure Three: When the Going Gets Tough, Stop Reporting. The Last Open Source Assessment of Support for the Afghan Government by Key District

(Reporting Halted Once Popular Support Declined. Population Only Sympathized or Supported the Afghan Central Government in 24% (29 of 121 Key Terrain and Area of Interest Districts)

Twenty-Five Years of Failed Governance in a Twenty-Year War

The world is filled with “fragile” or failed states, and the history of these states demonstrates all too clearly that having elites with good education and good intentions is no substitute for an effective structure of governance and for effective fiscal systems, effective planning and administration, practical political experience, and measures that really limit corruption and report on effectiveness.

Afghanistan has been one of those states ever since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, and a state that made remarkably little overall progress at a remarkably high cost. This is all too clear from Figure Four, which shows the World Bank’s ratings of key aspects of Afghan governance from 1995 to 2020, as well as other current rankings of the Afghan government by a range of international measures of the effectiveness of different governments and their ability to meet the needs of their people.

At the same time, the Afghan government did face deep structural pressures and challenges. One is geography and the comparative isolation of much of its rural population to District capitals. Another is ethnicity where the CIA World Factbook warns that “current statistical data on the sensitive subject of ethnicity in Afghanistan are not available, and ethnicity data from small samples of respondents to opinion polls are not a reliable alternative” but states that, “Afghanistan's 2004 constitution recognizes 14 ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Baloch, Turkmen, Nuristani, Pamiri, Arab, Gujar, Brahui, Qizilbash, Aimaq, and Pashai.” Language differences and religion are issues, and while the country is 99.7% Muslim, the CIA estimates that it is 84.7-89.7% Sunni and 10-15% Shiite – a critical issue given the Taliban’s past opposition to Shiite practices and its common border with Iran.

It is also critical to understand just how much pressure the civil structure of Afghanistan was under. It was not simply a matter of what became a nation-wide return of the Taliban and insurgency. There also are many civil reasons why most peaceful revolutions fail and why most so-called developing states do not develop at the rates necessary to meet popular needs.

Population Growth and Urbanization

One reason is population growth. Afghanistan has a median age of only 19.1 years, and a dependency ratio as high as 88.8. It is worth noting that the World Bank projects that Afghanistan had a population of some 7.9 million in 1950, 11.2 million in 1970, 13.4 million in 1979, 14.5 million in 1992, 21.6 million in 2001, and some 39.8 million today after twenty years of war – with a projected total of 65.7 million in 2050.

This growth has pushed large numbers of Afghans into cities and urban life because Afghans in rural areas have fled as the Taliban threat has risen and urban birth rates have also been remarkably high. The World Bank estimates that Afghanistan’s urban population grew by almost 4.5 percent a year between 2000 and 2010. Within the region, only Bhutan and Maldives experienced faster growth rates of urban population. This means urbanization rose by 45% between 2000 and 2010, and the CIA estimates that urbanization has probably reached at least 26% of the total population, and that it is still increasing by at least 3.3% a year.

Urbanization has also created a large number of young Afghans seeking jobs in the cash economy and some form of a real career, while education has raised expectations in an economy with few of these jobs outside the military and civil government. These jobs, however, often only pay enough to fund a normal middle-class life if one had special influence or was corrupt.
Afghans seeking a more modern middle-class life have often had no option other than corruption, and more powerful Afghans found corruption could safely bring them serious wealth. From the start, this same corruption affected the security forces as well as the civil sector. There is no clear way to quantify the growth of such trends and problems, but far too often, corruption or the abuse of privilege became the only practical option, and this is reflected all too clearly in the World Bank assessments of the Afghan government and military shown in Figure Four.

Coupled to hyper urbanization, deep internal ethnic and tribal divisions, and major infrastructure and terrain issues, this has meant that the government has faced extraordinary challenges since 2002. As noted earlier, these problems were also immediately complicated by a constitution that left an extremely weak legislature with little real local representation or internal control over the nation’s finances that could limit corruption from the local to national level.
Figure Four: Afghanistan: A Failed Civil Government

Transparency International: 16th most corrupt country in the world out of 180 countries rated.

Fragile State Index: 9th worst ranked country in the world in 2021

Freedom House: Global score is only 27. Only 13 for political rights and 14 for civil liberty out of a top score of 100.

UN Human Development Ranking: Ranks only 169 out of 189 countries ranked.

Progress Claims and Lying by Omission

Overoptimistic plans and official claims of progress have consistently disguised these realities. Claims of rapid social progress from 2002 to roughly 2014 did reflect real progress especially in urban areas. Even today, there is considerable truth in the BBC estimate of progress shown in Figure Five, which was made in July 2021 – although work by SIGAR and other sources indicates that such data exaggerate the rate of progress in areas like the rights of women, overall education, and health care – and that nation-wide data understate the sharp differences between progress in cities like Kabul and in rural areas, as well as the level of decline in many areas after 2014.

Many such claims were based on estimates that were extremely optimistic and for which there were few serious data collection efforts and reliable data. Moreover, in many cases, the quality of reporting on gains by District was sharply reduced as the Taliban returned – particularly in rural areas – and this decline was coupled to the failure to properly develop more modern governance at the local level and growing corruption and security issues.

The problems may explain why the U.S. stopped public reporting on progress in governance and in the impact of aid by District after 2014. As SIGAR has documented, it also led to a growing reliance on general claims about improvement in education, health, and the rights of women which SIGAR and other outside analytic efforts found to be increasingly uncertain.

It is striking for example, SIGAR found some estimates of student levels that require a child to be absent for three years before being reported as having ended their education, that many Districts lacked any enforcement capability to protect women, that some estimates of increased longevity seem to lack a clear source, and that estimates of progress in some areas are in sharp contradiction with CIA estimates that Afghanistan has the highest infant mortality rate in the world: 106.75 per 1,000 versus 88.03 for Somalia and 84.22 for the Central African Republic. (https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/infant-mortality-rate/country-comparison)

Figure Five: BBC Estimate of Progress in Afghanistan: 2001-2017

- Number of children in school at all levels has increased from 0.9 million in 2001 to 9.2 million in 2017 - with 39% of them girls. (Human Rights Watch)
- By 2012, the figure for girls enrolled in primary education had grown to more than 40%, although it's come down slightly. (UN) Girls attending Secondary School rose from 6% in 2003 to 39% in 2017 (World Bank)
- In 2019, 5% of women went to college or university, 22% had jobs, 20% of civil servant were female, 27% of MPs were women, and 1,000 had businesses (UN/World Bank, Amnesty)
- 22% of the population had access to the Internet (UN)
- 69% had mobile phones (UN)
- 4.4 million used social media. (UN)
- 14% had ban accounts: 23% of men and 7% of women (World Bank)

From Afghanistan to “Kabulstan”

While it is uncertain that sufficient data exist to track the patterns involved even if classified or other official data are fully made public, it also will be critical to estimate the rate at which the level of governance declined or failed to meet local needs and standards by District in rural areas over time. The government’s losses in the war did not simply consist of Taliban gains. They consisted of the failures to appoint honest and effective officials; ensuring that District officials, police, and security forces actually carried out their missions; and that money was used honestly and effectively.

Media reporting alone shows that there are many cases in rural areas where District officials, police, and local security personnel were clearly appointed because of outside political influence, did not operate effectively, and created a power vacuum and probable lack of public support. These problems clearly increased over time as more and more focus was placed on securing populated areas and sources of government income.

It seems probable that if the data do exist and can be recovered, a full analysis would show that by 2014, many aspects of governance were local, controlled by power brokers, or simply allowed to decline. The end result was to effectively shift much of the focus of the central government to urban areas like Kabul, Kunduz, Herat, Lashkar Gah, and Kandahar – effectively making the central focus of both governance and security the equivalent of Kabul, rather than Afghanistan.
A Failed State Created a Failed Economy

Current reporting on the Afghan civil economy also highlights the extent to which the Afghan government has failed to meet people’s needs and created the conditions that made a continuing U.S. effort problematic. There are many sources of data that illustrate the level of these Afghan economic failures, but SIGAR, the World Bank, and CIA can scarcely be accused of being pessimistic and biased – and their assessments at the end of spring 2021 are summarized in Figure Six.

These assessments also only tell part of the story, and they have major structural problems that limit their value in assessing the links between failed economies, stability, and the outcomes of civil conflict. The SIGAR assessment flags some key problems. The government’s dependence on donor aid for some 80% of all public security and civil expenditures ($11 billion in an economy that totals only some $78 billion) – a dependence that donors seem unlikely to fund in the future even if the government does not collapse and that could lead to massive cuts if the Taliban does take over.

SIGAR estimates that, “In early 2020, 55% of Afghans lived below the poverty line (defined as 2,064 afghanis per person per month or around $1 in daily income), according to the most recent household survey data, an increase from 34% in 2008.” Some other estimates put the percentage now at the poverty level closer to 70%. Here, the CIA estimates that the real Afghan GDP per capita was only $2,178 in 2019 – before the impact of Covid-19 – and ranked 213 out of 228 countries, which is the 5th lowest per capita income in the world and one that illustrates the level of probable corruption in all too many Afghans that live by something approaching at least lower-middle class by Western standards.

SIGAR estimates that Covid-19 has had a major impact in cutting the growth of the urban service and industrial sectors, although such estimates are now almost impossible to make because of the lack of adequate economic data and from the impact of Taliban gains in limiting commercial traffic along roads throughout the country.

The World Bank warns that,

The private sector is extremely narrow, with employment concentrated in low-productivity agriculture (44 percent of the total workforce works in agriculture and 60 percent of households derive some income from agriculture). Private sector development and diversification is constrained by insecurity, political instability, weak institutions, inadequate infrastructure, widespread corruption, and a difficult business environment (Afghanistan was ranked 173rd of 190 countries in the 2020 Doing Business Survey).

Weak institutions and property rights constrain financial inclusion and access to finance, with credit to the private sector equal to only three percent of GDP. Weak competitiveness drives a structural trade deficit, equal to around 30 percent of GDP, financed almost entirely from grant inflows. Grants continue to finance around 75 percent of public spending. Security expenditures (national security and police) are high at around 28 percent of GDP in 2019, compared to the low-income country average of around three percent of GDP, driving total public spending of around 57 percent of GDP. The illicit economy accounts for a significant share of production, exports, and employment, and includes opium production, smuggling, and illegal mining.

The CIA reports that,

… political instability, expiring international financial commitments, and the COVID-19 pandemic have wrought significant adversity on the Afghan economy, with a projected 5% contraction.

Current political parties’ power-sharing agreement following the September 2019 presidential elections as well as ongoing Taliban attacks and peace talks have led to Afghan economic instability. This instability,
coupled with expiring international grant and assistance, endangers recent fiscal gains and has led to more internally displaced persons. In November 2020, Afghanistan secured $12 billion in additional international aid for 2021-2025, much of which is conditional upon Taliban peace progress. Additionally, Afghanistan continues to experience influxes of repatriating Afghans, mostly from Iran, significantly straining economic and security institutions.

As some of the economists and analysts involved in making these assessments note, these assessments may actually understate the steady decline in the Afghan economy and its potential impact on the fighting, civil conflict, and Afghanistan’s internal tensions that has helped the Taliban to make major gains. None of the current assessments of the Afghan economy address popular views of corruption, views of the role played by the central government versus the Taliban, and income distribution. They do not address differences in the economic situation by region, by group within Afghan society, or by the inequities in income distribution. None of the economic assessments are tied to the impact of economics on the fighting or perceptions of the peace process.
Cordesman: Afghanistan: Why We Lost

Figure Six: Afghanistan: A Failed Civil Economy

SIGAR Summary in Report to Congress, 1Q 2021 (p. 132-133)

U.S. efforts to bolster private-sector investment to support sustainable economic growth are part of a broader strategy to transition Afghanistan from being predominately an assistance recipient to becoming a long-term and self-sufficient economic partner. Yet, Afghanistan remains poor, aid-dependent, and conflict-affected, with any potential economic growth in the short term further limited by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Donor grants totaling at least $8.6 billion per year (covering both security and civilian assistance) currently finance over half of the government budget—but almost 80% of Afghanistan’s $11 billion in total public expenditures when off-budget assistance is counted along with on-budget aid.

On February 22, 2021, following weeks of debate in which the draft budget was twice rejected, the Afghan parliament approved a 473 billion afghani (approximately $6 billion) national budget for FY 1400 (December 2020–December 2021), comprising some $4 billion for the regular budget covering government operations and $2 billion for the development budget.

Only 46% of the FY 1400 budget is funded by domestic revenue sources. Increased government service provision and an economy fueled by donor funds rapidly improved many of Afghanistan’s development outcomes through the 2014 drawdown of most international troops after which the Afghan government assumed responsibility for the fight against the Taliban insurgency. But licit annual GDP growth of just under 10% dropped to low-single-digit rates following that drawdown.

Lower GDP, population growth, and returnees from other countries have had an impact on Afghan poverty levels. In early 2020, 55% of Afghans lived below the poverty line (defined as 2,064 afghanis per person per month or around $1 in daily income), according to the most recent household survey data, an increase from 34% in 2008.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected that Afghanistan’s GDP would drop by 5% during 2020 in the midst of the pandemic, with country’s unemployment rate rising to 37.9%, up from 23.9% in 2019. The World Bank estimated this quarter that the Afghan economy actually contracted by only 1.9% of GDP, based on preliminary data from Afghanistan’s National Statistics and Information Authority. The World Bank explains that this is due to 5.3% growth in the agricultural sector as a result of COVID-19-related disruptions having a limited impact in rural areas and favorable weather conditions during 2020. However, the lockdowns and border closures severely contracted economic activity within urban and peri-urban areas, leading to a 4.2% contraction in the industry sector and 4.8% contraction in the service sector during 2020.

Additionally, while the World Bank had projected that poverty levels would rise as high as 72%, it now estimates that overall poverty levels actually decreased from 55% to 47.1% in 2020, due to a less severe economic impact of the pandemic in rural areas than originally projected. In urban areas, however, the Bank estimated that poverty levels rose from 41.6% to 45.5% in 2020.

If the current security and political conditions hold and international support remains at the levels pledged during the 2020 Geneva Conference, the World Bank projects that Afghanistan’s economy will grow by only 1% of GDP during 2021, as a result of continued weak investor confidence and an anticipated contraction in the agricultural sector due to the effects of drought. Considering normal rates of population growth and the impact of returnees from other countries, the per capita GDP indicator of economic health could actually decline.

The pandemic also contributed to the Afghan government’s inability to generate sufficient domestic revenue and its heavy dependence on international assistance—long-standing challenges stemming from limited capacity, persistent corruption, tax evasion, and the strength of the informal and illicit economies. In Afghanistan, approximately 90% of the economy is informal and, therefore, largely escapes taxation, further inhibiting the Afghan government’s financial self-sufficiency.

As the Afghan economy has struggled to find sustainable economic growth, the country has increasingly relied in recent years on remittances from Afghans working abroad, especially in neighboring Iran. By 2019, remittances accounted for the equivalent of 4.3% of Afghanistan’s annual GDP, an increase from 1.2% in 2014, according to World Bank data.

However, officials from the intergovernmental International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimate this figure could be as high as 15–20%, given that many remittances are sent through the informal hawala money-transfer system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced remittances to Afghanistan by a World Bank-estimated 10% in 2020. Afghans in Iran, for instance, have struggled to find work due to COVID-19 and economic sanctions, forcing many to return to Afghanistan, where they face rising levels of unemployment, poverty, and insecurity. The need for humanitarian assistance
has been heightened by the record-breaking number of Afghan migrants returning to Afghanistan. In 2020, the IOM recorded the largest return of Afghan migrants in a single year, approximately one million—almost double the count in 2019. Over 200,000 returned between January and March 2021, more than double the number from the same periods in 2019 and 2020.


- Afghanistan’s economy is shaped by fragility and aid dependence. The private sector is extremely narrow, with employment concentrated in low-productivity agriculture (44 percent of the total workforce works in agriculture and 60 percent of households derive some income from agriculture). Private sector development and diversification is constrained by insecurity, political instability, weak institutions, inadequate infrastructure, widespread corruption, and a difficult business environment (Afghanistan was ranked 173rd of 190 countries in the 2020 Doing Business Survey). Weak institutions and property rights constrain financial inclusion and access to finance, with credit to the private sector equal to only three percent of GDP. Weak competitiveness drives a structural trade deficit, equal to around 30 percent of GDP, financed almost entirely from grant inflows. Grants continue to finance around 75 percent of public spending. Security expenditures (national security and police) are high at around 28 percent of GDP in 2019, compared to the low-income country average of around three percent of GDP, driving total public spending of around 57 percent of GDP. The illicit economy accounts for a significant share of production, exports, and employment, and includes opium production, smuggling, and illegal mining.

- With an influx of aid since 2002, Afghanistan sustained rapid economic growth and improvements against important social indicators for more than a decade. Annual growth averaged 9.4 percent between 2003 and 2012, driven by a booming aid-driven services sector, and strong agricultural growth. A range of factors have since slowed economic and social progress, with the economy growing by only 2.5 percent per annum between 2015-2020, and gains against development indicators slowing or – in some cases – reversing. Aid flows decreased from around 100 percent of GDP in 2009 to 42.9 percent of GDP in 2020 (with the number of international troops declining from more than 130,000 in 2011, to around 15,000 by end-2014, to around 10,000 today). Declining grants led to a protracted contraction of the services sector, with an associated deterioration in employment and incomes. The security situation deteriorated, with the Taliban insurgency gaining control over increased territory and intensifying attacks on military and civilian targets, with civilian casualties totaling more than 10,000 per year between 2014 and 2019. The impacts of declining grants and worsening security were exacerbated by political instability following the disputed outcome of the 2014 presidential elections. The formation of the National Unity Government under an extra-constitutional power-sharing agreement led to administrative disruptions and slowed reform progress.

- Direct negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government officially began on September 12, 2020 following the Doha agreement signed between the US and the Taliban in February 2020. Under the terms of the US-Taliban agreement, US forces have scaled down offensive operations, large numbers of Taliban prisoners have been released, and Taliban mass civilian casualty bombings and attacks on international forces have ceased. Nonetheless, Taliban attacks on Afghan security forces have reached record levels, and more than 20 civil society activists and other prominent civilians have been killed in a campaign of targeted killings. In response to slow progress with Intra-Afghan negotiations and continued high levels of violence, the new US administration announced a review of the Doha agreement, including its commitment to withdraw all US troops by May 2021. The future of negotiations, and how the Taliban may respond to any delay in the US withdrawal remains unclear.

- At the Geneva conference held in November 2020, donors renewed their commitment to aid support to Afghanistan for 2021-2024. However, several major donors provided only single-year pledges, with future support made conditional upon the government achieving accelerated progress in efforts to combat corruption, reduce poverty, and advance ongoing peace talks. Aid support is now expected to decline by around 20 percent from the previous pledging period (US$15.2 billion over 2016-2020) but could fall even lower if conditions are not met or if major donors further reduce commitment levels amid domestic fiscal pressures. Afghanistan now faces daunting challenges in sustaining recent development gains in the face of mounting political uncertainties, declining international grant support, and continued insecurity. Policy options are narrowed by the weak implementation capacity of government agencies, reflecting governance constraints, and tightly constrained macroeconomic policy options in the context of narrowing fiscal space and weak monetary transmission mechanisms.
World Bank Group engagement pursues a programmatic approach to support the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF II) that was presented by the Government of Afghanistan at the Geneva conference. Advisory work and operations focus on: macro-fiscal policy and management; finance, private investment, and job creation; public sector governance and anti-corruption; human capital development and service delivery; citizen engagement and social inclusion; urban development and infrastructure, connectivity and sustainability.

CIA World Factbook (July 5, 2021)

Prior to 2001, Afghanistan was an extremely poor, landlocked, and foreign aid-dependent country. Increased domestic economic activity occurred following the US-led invasion, as well as significant international economic development assistance. This increased activity expanded access to water, electricity, sanitation, education, and health services, and fostered consistent growth in government revenues since 2014. While international security forces have been drawing down since 2012, with much higher U.S. forces’ drawdowns occurring since 2017, economic progress continues, albeit uneven across sectors and key economic indicators. After recovering from the 2018 drought and growing 3.9% in 2019, political instability, expiring international financial commitments, and the COVID-19 pandemic have wrought significant adversity on the Afghan economy, with a projected 5% contraction.

Current political parties’ power-sharing agreement following the September 2019 presidential elections as well as ongoing Taliban attacks and peace talks have led to Afghan economic instability. This instability, coupled with expiring international grant and assistance, endangers recent fiscal gains and has led to more internally displaced persons. In November 2020, Afghanistan secured $12 billion in additional international aid for 2021-2025, much of which is conditional upon Taliban peace progress. Additionally, Afghanistan continues to experience influxes of repatriating Afghans, mostly from Iran, significantly straining economic and security institutions.

Afghanistan’s trade deficit remains at approximately 31% of GDP and is highly dependent on financing through grants and aid. While Afghan agricultural growth remains consistent, recent industrial and services growth have been enormously impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns and trade cessations. While trade with the People’s Republic of China has rapidly expanded in recent years, Afghanistan still relies heavily upon India and Pakistan as export partners but is more diverse in its import partners. Furthermore, Afghanistan still struggles to effectively enforce business contracts, facilitate easy tax collection, and enable greater international trade for domestic enterprises.
Failing to Assess the Civil Side of Taliban Gains

Still another aspect of the civil dimension of the war merits special attention. There has been remarkably little open source effort to measure the extent to which the Taliban gained public support at the District and Provincial levels from 2002 onwards as well as the effectiveness of its ability to influence and control the population of the Districts it controls and is contesting.

Most of the military reporting on the war has focused on the fighting to control given Districts, rather than the reasons why the Taliban made gains establishing effective political and security control of some Districts and not others or how the population has viewed the rise in Taliban presence and its military and economic activity relative to the role of the government.

Few studies have examined the reasons why the Afghan government appointed governors and other officials that were not corrupt or ineffective, but often in the context of Afghan politics and not how they affected the course of the fighting. At least in recent years, there also have been no credible official open source reports as to whether the central government or Taliban give Districts or contest them, and a series of official U.S. metrics has been developed that only measures whether the Taliban wins major battles that it initiates – an absurd metric in a war where the real measure of victory and the reasons for its success is the expansion of Taliban influence and control.

Why Does the Taliban Make Gains in Controlling Given Districts: Some Limited Polling Indicators

The rapid Taliban gains from June 2021 onwards have shown how important a rise of Taliban presence by District can be, but reports of Taliban gains generally only report on government losses, and not on the mix of civil and military reasons for Taliban success. One partial exception is the Asia Foundation. It has conducted detailed annual polls that do provide detailed assessments of popular views and expectations, although it must be stressed that these polls were not designed to measures attitudes towards the course of the fighting and were not designed to tie polling results to the factors driving the war on a national, regional, or factional level.

At the same time, the Asia Foundation polls do provide some insights that indicate that better polling – or reporting on civil attitudes by District and local area – might play a critical role in understanding the course of fighting. The detailed polling results do show sharp differences in popular attitudes on security; the economy; and governance by region, Province, urban and rural area as well as ethnicity.

The Asia Foundation surveys have also provided some warning about possible future Taliban gains. Some of these results are shown in Figure Seven, and they are taken from the Asia Foundation’s 2019 survey – the last year when the Foundation has so far been able to make a full survey – and it shows the rising popular concern with security and personal safety,

... people remain deeply concerned about their household economy. A total 58.2% of Afghans surveyed said that the country was going in the wrong direction. A total of 26.6% cited unemployment, 12.8% cited the bad economy, and 4.2% cited high prices. More than three-quarters of respondents (77.7%) perceived economic difficulties to be the biggest problem facing youth, and this was consistent regardless of gender or place of residence. (https://asiafoundation.org/2019/12/03/2019-survey-of-the-afghan-people-reveals-concerns-on-peace-deal/).

Fear for personal safety is now at its highest recorded level, with 74.5% of respondents indicating that they fear for their personal safety. This represents an increase of over 3 percentage points since 2018(71.1%). Fear for personal safety has risen every year since 2012, when it was 48.2%. Aside from recent year-on-year increases, the 2019 figure represents an almost 100% increase from the first time the question was asked, in
2006 (39.6%), and a sizeable increase from 2012, when fear for personal safety was at its third-lowest point (48.2%). Interestingly, the number of respondents in Nimroz Province who report fear for personal safety has decreased approximately 40%, from 62.6% in 2018 to 39.0% this year. Another noticeable decrease in fear for personal safety, from 29.9% in 2018 to 21.4% this year, is seen in Badakhshan.

… Fear while participating in an election is also at its highest recorded level (63.3%), and this fear has increased by over 50% since the question was first asked, in 2006 (41.1%), and is representative of a longitudinal trend of rising fear and insecurity across much of the country. Respondents’ increased fear of voting may be attributed to the 2018 parliamentary elections process, which, according to UNAMA, saw a deliberate Taliban campaign of “violence and intimidation” that resulted in record numbers of civilians killed and injured on election day. This campaign included attacks by improvised explosive device, indirect fire, and small arms fire, along with abductions, threats, and intimidation of voters.”
Figure Seven: Rise in the Level of Popular Fear in Afghanistan

Q-27. How often do you fear for your own personal safety or security or for that of your family these days? Would you say you always, often, sometimes, rarely, or never fear for you and your family’s safety? (Percent who say “always,” “often,” or “sometimes.”)

“Winning Hearts and Minds” versus Controlling the Population:

Interestingly enough, the polling results in Figure Eight do not show that the Taliban has gained in popularity over time, in spite of its gains in the number of Districts in controls. At the same time, a 2019 survey shows a surprising rise in popular belief that reconciliation with the Taliban is possible – perhaps more out of hope than actual belief. A different set of survey questions might explain this response, and some meaningful measurement of the causes driving “hearts and minds” may be possible in future conflicts.

The results of Asia Foundation Poll are similar to the results of polls in other conflict countries like Iraq, or of those that have had major upheavals such as the “Arab spring,” in ways that need further study. They have consistently shown relatively high overall support for the Afghan government, but they have also shown that large percentages of the population feel the government has critical failures. For example, the most recent full poll showed that,

Overall, 81.5% of respondents in 2019 say corruption is a major problem in Afghanistan as a whole, identical with last year (81.5%). At the same time, 15.6% say corruption is a minor problem, and 2.5% say corruption is not a problem at all… Regionally, perceptions of corruption as a major problem in Afghanistan have risen in the South West (from 73.3% in 2018 to 83.0% in 2019) and the East (from 78.7% in 2018 to 84.5% in 2019) and declined in the South East (from 78.1% in 2018 to 68.8% in 2019) and the North West (from 82.0% in 2018 to 77.2% in 2019).

By Province, respondents in Panjshir (96.8%), Helmand (95.0%), Nangarhar (93.1%), and Kabul (92.9%) are the most likely to say corruption is a major problem in Afghanistan, while respondents in Paktia (50.0%), Sar-e-Pul (56.3%), Ghor (57.0%), and Paktika (57.1%) are least likely. Urban respondents are more likely to say corruption is a major problem in Afghanistan (88.7%) than rural respondents (79.0%).

… Some 67.9% of Afghans surveyed say corruption is a major problem in their daily life, 2.7 percentage points lower than the 70.6% in 2018. More than one-fifth of respondents, 23.1%, call this a minor problem, and 8.3% say it is not a problem at all. Perception of corruption as a major problem in daily life is highest in Helmand (93.7%), Badghis (85.2%), Uruzgan (83.4%), Nangarhar (83.2%), and Kabul (82.7%) and lowest in Paktika (30.4%), Panjshir (35.6%), Nimroz (42.0%), Kapisa (47.7%), and Paktia (50.1%).

Urban residents (75.6%) are more likely to see corruption as a major problem in their daily lives than rural residents (65.3%), and males (71.7%) are more likely than females (64.2%). This result for females represents a notable decline from 70.6% in 2018. The differences between urban and rural respondents may be attributable to the more frequent contact urbanites have with government officials and institutions (e.g., universities), which may result in higher expectations that bribes will be necessary simply to navigate an urban setting.

More recent efforts in 2020 to use phone polls to produce snapshot results also produced surprisingly optimistic results regarding hope for the peace process (44%-54%) and the ability of the Afghan National Army to provide security assistance without foreign technical assistance (78%), although 74% reported that employment opportunities had declined in the last year. (Asia Foundation, https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Afghanistan-Flash-Survey-Report-2021-Wave-3-Infographics.pdf).

The reasons why such polls in developing states reflect such serious popular concerns – over the role of the government in employment, corruption, the economy, and services – but do not reflect high rates of overall popular criticism of the government are unclear. One reason may be the people are more willing to make specific complaints but are afraid to openly criticize their governments – and police and security forces. What is clear, however, is that polling on the civil activities of both the government and on the threat in a war zone may now be possible in an era of cell phones, but it will require different questions and ones tailored to a given insurgency and country.
There also is a good reason to look beyond “hearts and minds.” “Winning hearts and minds” is a classic cliché in counterinsurgency campaigns, but it also, is to some extent, a fantasy. “Hearts and minds” may shape behavior in a functioning democracy, but almost all actual counterinsurgency warfare is not a battle for popular perceptions.

It instead is a battle for control of the population shaped by the use of intimidation, terror, extortion, and other uses of force – coupled to various economic and social incentives and disincentives. The ability to provide security is critical. So is the ability to directly reward fighters and supporter as well as to punish and penalize opponents. The end result is that the civil struggle at the local level is usually one between contesting authoritarian approaches, and certainly this has been the case in many areas in Afghanistan.

Put differently, this means comparing the civil tactics used by each side is as important as comparing their military tactics, particularly if the insurgency is concentrating on control of the population rather than winning tactical victories or seizing fixed objectives like District capitols. In practice, insurgencies often gain more from avoiding open battles with better armed outside or government forces until they have established a major presence in rural areas and have established networks that allow them to attack government officials or headquarters and to create an active presence in given cities or key populated areas.

It also explains why the ability of government forces to win a tactical victory or recover lost areas can be largely irrelevant. “Winning” is not meaningful unless the government can actually “hold” the area, and “build” some kind of enduring and superior civil presence and control. As will be discussed shortly, this is why U.S. and allied troops often could not exploit their tactical victories from 2002 onwards and why the later victories of Afghan elite ground troops supported by U.S. airpower had limited enduring impact. Far too often, there was no mix of governance, police, and local forces that could hold or consistently purse the Taliban, and there was no civil capacity to govern that met popular needs.

Here, it is worth remembering the classic exchange that Colonel Harry Summers reportedly had had with a North Vietnamese officer during a break in the Paris Peace Talks in the early 1970s. Colonel Summers stated, “You know you never defeated us on the battlefield.” The North Vietnamese colonel replied, “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.”
Figure Eight: Popular Sympathy for Taliban and Armed Opposition Groups

Who do you think poses a threat to the security of this local area? (Allow two mentions.)

The Military Lessons of a Counterinsurgency, Not a War Against Terrorism

There are many military lessons to learn (and relearn) from the course of the Afghan War. All of these lessons, however, must be based on a fundamental reappraisal of the basic character of the war. There has always been something absurd about calling the war in Afghanistan a “war against terrorism.” The key terrorist movement – al-Qaeda – was largely driven out of the country in the first few months of the war. Even the portion of the war against terrorism that did still focus on al-Qaeda then largely shifted its focus to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and its spin-offs in Iraq and other areas.

Aside from a few short months in 2001, the war was a counterinsurgency campaign. It was fought against a Taliban that had been the de facto government of most of Afghanistan at the time the U.S. intervened after 9/11. It became a relatively ruthless war for control of the population, but all serious insurgency campaigns are. The Taliban did fight to regain power in Afghanistan using many of the same methods of irregular warfare that have characterized many other revolutionary and insurgent movements.

Learning from the Full History of Efforts to Generate Afghan Forces and Assess the Course of the Fighting

It must be stressed that the analysis which follows is not based on access to either classified data or the full record of what went wrong in the training and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) formation and deployment process. If the U.S. is to really learn from the history of the war, it requires open and transparent historical analyses of all the available information. It also requires analysis of what might have happened if aid and support had been conditional and based on actual Afghan performance and if the flaws in Afghan forces and the ways they were supported have been openly and honestly reported in ways that might have created more pressure to actually address them.

If the U.S. is to learn from the military side of the Afghan conflict it must fully examine all of the classified and open source data that traces the resurgence of the Taliban from 2002 onwards, including sources of support such as the role Pakistan played it giving it some degree of sanctuary as well as the role power brokers and narcotics played in weakening government forces and funding the Taliban. It must analyze the impact of corruption and poor leadership in the Afghan government on the Taliban’s return to given portions of Afghanistan.

It also must fully and honestly assess the major mistakes the U.S. and its allies made in shaping Afghan security forces – many of which repeated mistakes the U.S. made in Vietnam. It also must look beyond the war in Afghanistan. Some of the delays in, and under-resourcing of, U.S. efforts to create effective Afghan security forces were driven to some extent by the growing U.S. focus on Iraq. This led to efforts to shift too much of the training and support mission to allied countries.

At the same time, a full historical analysis must be made of the extent to which the lack of focus on the growing insurgent threat helped lead to an excessive focus on creating regular and elite army forces, rather than including the kind of police and local of security forces needed to defeat a growing insurgency. It must also examine why later efforts to create effective police and local security forces, at the District and local levels with the necessary paramilitary capabilities, were given erratic and then marginal priority after 2011 – and largely failed.
It must examine the gross initial shortfalls in equipment and trainers for the new force, and why the land and air equipment the U.S. eventually did provide Afghan forces still was either too complex for forces that had far less education and technical experience than the ARVN or why those forces were not given the training and support systems to allow them to properly operate it through 2021 – problems later documented in great detail in the reports to Congress from SIGAR and the LIG.

It must examine the extent to which the problems in creating Afghan forces were compounded by the same failures to adopt proper fiscal controls, make aid conditional when corruption occurred, limit internal political divisions and frictions, and perpetuate the short annual rotation cycle for advisors and partners that helped to cause failures in many aspects of the civil effort – and to the extent to which Afghan force development efforts were limited by U.S. efforts to shift the burden of force generation to U.S. allies as well as the cycle of recurrent efforts to cut U.S. casualties from 2011 onwards by reducing forward support to Afghan forces in combat.

The U.S. also needs to fully assess the degree to which it failed to provide adequate open source reporting on Taliban gains and Afghan National Defense and Security Force (ANDSF) failures and limitations throughout the war, and especially why the U.S. steadily classified the real security situation after the formal end of U.S. and NATO combat operations in 2014. This largely disguised the growing dependence on a few elite and effective Afghan combat units – actively supported by U.S. cadres and air power as well as massive ANDSF dependence on U.S. funded contractors – although both SIGAR and the LIG reports did reflect these trends on an open source basis to the extent they were allowed to do so.

The U.S. also needs to look at the extent to which the real growth of the Taliban insurgency was disguised by the creation of metrics that focused on major clashes between the Taliban and the ANDSF in ways that grossly overstated the independence of Afghan combat units and the importance of apparent ANDSF victories which ignored the fact that Taliban “defeats” often resulted in lasting increases in the Taliban presence and control in the countryside.

While all effectiveness metrics tend to be controversial, far too many of the metrics on attacks and their outcome – along with the classification of data on Taliban versus government control of Afghan Districts as well as increased presence and attack activity – pushed public affairs “spin” to the point of dishonesty. It disguised the need for a forward presence, the potential value of efforts like the Afghan hands program, and the real gains made thanks to the continued presence of Special Forces and CIA personnel, other elite troops, and the new Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs).

2002-2011: From Counterterrorism to Insurgency Without an Effective Effort to Create Afghan Forces

Some key trends are clear, and one is the extent to which the U.S. was slow to react to the return of the Taliban. In some ways, it overreacted to initial success.

The covert U.S. special forces and CIA campaign that began on September 26, 2001, and the public beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom that began with a supporting air campaign on October 7, 2001, led to almost immediate victories for the Northern Alliance ground forces the U.S. supported. The end result was that the Taliban left Kabul before any fighting took place on November 13, 2001 and it surrendered Kandahar on December 6 while al-Qaeda had to flee its stronghold in Tora Bora in December 2001. Bin Laden then fled to Pakistan – possibly with
Pakistani aid – and al-Qaeda effectively relocated to the tribal area near Afghanistan’s northwest border with Pakistan. Arguably, al-Qaeda ceased to be an active military force in Afghanistan after the battle of Operation Anaconda in Paktia in March 2002. In effect, the main U.S. war against international terrorism in Afghanistan lasted for all of five months.

In contrast, the counterinsurgency war against the Taliban went on, and it steadily grew for over 19 more years. There was nothing subtle about the rise in Taliban activity that followed as the failure in the Afghan civil government and the lack of a meaningful effort to create effective Afghan forces became clear from 2004 onwards.

**Figure Nine** shows the high rate of growth in the Taliban threat and the grindingly slow rate at which Afghan forces were developed and funded between 2004-2011, the reliance on divided U.S. and allied combat forces to respond, and the sudden and erratic increases in Afghan Army force goals. It is only one of the many clear open source warnings that the frequency of Taliban activity and attacks increased sharply after 2004, and that most attacks were directed at targets other than the Afghan military.
Figure Nine: Afghan Force Development vs. Afghan Violence: 2004-2010

State and DoD Funding of ANA Training: 2002-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011 request</th>
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</thead>
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<td>$16.0</td>
<td>$283.2</td>
<td>$1,317.5</td>
<td>$766.1</td>
<td>$4,883.1</td>
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<td>$5,604.1</td>
<td>$7,532.9</td>
<td>$26,413.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>State</td>
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<td>$191.6</td>
<td>$434.4</td>
<td>$413.3</td>
<td>$1.0</td>
<td>$1.2</td>
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<td>$1.4</td>
<td>$1.5</td>
<td>$1.5</td>
<td>$1,122.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>$355.6</td>
<td>$517.5</td>
<td>$1,730.8</td>
<td>$767.1</td>
<td>$4,884.3</td>
<td>$1,787.9</td>
<td>$4,075.0</td>
<td>$5,605.6</td>
<td>$7,534.4</td>
<td>$27,535.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is equally clear that the U.S. and NATO were slow to react, and that their initial reaction was poorly resourced and ineffective. A GAO report, issued as late as 2011 and based on U.S. command reporting, provides the data summarized in **Figure Ten**. (GAO, *Afghanistan Security: Afghan Army Growing, but Additional Trainers Needed; Long-term Costs Not Determined*, GAO 11-66, January 2011). It also provides the following insights into the failure to properly train and equip even Afghan Army forces – failures that followed on years of previous open source warnings by the U.S., as well as warnings about the lack of effective coordination in allied efforts and in building up police and local security forces.

In the case of Afghan NCOS,

Despite some progress, the ANA is continuing to face shortfalls in non-commissioned officers (NCO) needed to provide leadership to ANA units in the field. As of October 2010, about one-quarter of NCO positions in ANA combat units were unfilled. This represents an improvement since our last report, when we found that, between November 2007 and February 2008, the proportion of unfilled NCO positions ranged as high as 50 percent. In spite of this improvement, NTM-A/CSTC-A stated that it considers the ongoing shortfall of NCOs to be a major challenge, noting that development of leaders is essential to improving ANA capability.

In the case of overall training efforts,

NTM-A/CSTC-A documentation notes that, due to the presence of additional U.S. personnel, the ANA’s average instructor-to-trainee ratio in basic training improved from about 1 instructor for every 79 trainees as of November 2009 to approximately 1 instructor for every 24 trainees as of November 2010—a key factor, according to NTM-A/CSTC-A, in improved marksmanship qualification rates among ANA trainees. (Fig. 11 shows one such U.S. soldier providing marksmanship training to ANA recruits.) However, according to NTM-A/CSTC-A, while U.S. forces on temporary deployment have improved the quality of ANA basic training, these personnel were not intended to provide instruction in the advanced skills that the ANA must acquire by the time it grows to 171,600.

Similarly, a November 2010 NTM-A/CSTC-A document noted a particularly serious shortage in the number of instructors needed to teach the ANA specialized skills and stated that unless critical instructor positions are filled between December 2010 and July 2011, the ability of the ANA to develop skills it needs to start assuming lead responsibility for Afghanistan’s security may be delayed.

The ANA is also facing shortfalls in coalition training teams needed to develop the skills of new army units once they are fielded. According to NTM-A/CSTC-A, field-based training of the ANA is vital given that army forces completing unit training have limited capability. For example, NTM-A/CSTC-A documentation notes that, due to the presence of additional U.S. personnel, the ANA’s average instructor-to-trainee ratio in basic training improved from about 1 instructor for every 79 trainees as of November 2009 to approximately 1 instructor for every 24 trainees as of November 2010—a key factor, according to NTM-A/CSTC-A, in improved marksmanship qualification rates among ANA trainees. (Fig. 11 shows one such U.S. soldier providing marksmanship training to ANA recruits.) However, according to NTM-A/CSTC-A, while U.S. forces on temporary deployment have improved the quality of ANA basic training, these personnel were not intended to provide instruction in the advanced skills that the ANA must acquire by the time it grows to 171,600.

Given the generally low level of capability that ANA units have upon completing unit training, NTM-A/CSTC-A officials stated that they expect newly formed units to receive substantial training in the field from training teams and partner units. However, shortages exist in the number of training teams available to assist in ANA development. NTM-A/CSTC-A documentation specifies that a total of 205 training teams are needed to complete fielding of a 171,600-person ANA by October 2011. However, as of September 2010, the total number of training teams fielded or pledged by coalition nations was 164—41 fewer than the number needed. According to IJC, given the serious challenges that the ANA faces, the ability of army units to develop greater capability will be delayed if they lack training teams to provide field-based training.

In the case of major equipment shortfalls,

As of November 2010, the ANA had less than half of the authorized equipment amount on hand for 17 of 48 equipment items (35 percent). This is a slight improvement since the GAO 2008 report, when it found that there were 21 of 55 equipment items (38 percent) for which army units had less than half of the required amount on hand.29 Additionally, as of November 2010, the ANA had an average of about 72 percent of the authorized amount on hand per equipment item, as compared with an average of about 60 percent on hand per equipment item at the time of our last report. This improvement notwithstanding, shortages remain in weapons, vehicles, communications items, and protective equipment.
Although the ANA’s equipping levels have slightly improved, IJC documentation indicates that not all pieces of equipment that the ANA has on hand are considered ready to be used in operations. According to IJC, while factors such as enemy action and normal wear and tear can lead to equipment being deemed unserviceable, an additional factor is that the ANA continues to lack responsibility for its equipment. In addition, a senior NTM-A/CSTC-A official stated that the ANA’s nascent logistics system gives it limited ability to maintain or repair the equipment it receives. Similarly, IJC and SIGAR30 have both identified the ANA’s weak logistics system as a significant challenge to development of capable army units. Consequently, although IJC and NTM-A/CSTC-A are working to institute programs to address these challenges, concerns exist about the extent to which the ANA will properly maintain the equipment items it receives.

Effort to develop ANDSF forces had critical shortfalls in trainers, major problems with attrition and desertion, and readiness ratings ranging from mediocre to bad. While much of the past open source reporting does not seem to be available at present, the NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A)/Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A) also reported many of the programs that arose in the ANDSF training effort from 2002-2009, after Lt. General William Caldwell took command in November 2009, including major shortfalls in trainers who were publicly reported as serving even though they had only been assigned and their lack of background and experience.

Extensive open source reporting on the shortfalls in local security force and police development showed that problems and underfunding in these areas were still an issue at the time. SIGAR and other open source reporting on the history of these efforts, however, also demonstrates that the repeated failures, changes in leadership and organization, and inadequate priority – which were never corrected and made Afghanistan vulnerable to Taliban gains – allowed the Taliban to defeat the Afghan Army in many cases, and this only grew worse – not better – as the war progressed.
Figure Ten: Illustrative Shortfalls in Trainers and ANA NCOs in January 2011

Trainer Shortfalls in January 2011, even if Trainers pledged but absent are counted

NCO Shortfalls in January 2011, even if AWOLs and Missing are counted

Massive Equipment Shortfalls

“Ending” the U.S. and Allied Combat Role in 2011? 2014?

These basic failures in developing effective Afghan forces were followed by a failed surge and then by the “failed” end to U.S. and allied combat operations in Afghanistan. The full history of these developments will be another area where open source data will need to be supported by full access to classified and official data, but there is an unavoidable level of irony in the extent to which the current focus on U.S. withdrawals of military training and combat support ignores the extent to which the U.S. supposedly went through a similar cycle some ten years earlier, and that it did so without a serious effort to create Afghan forces.

Whatever one may think of the deadlines for the U.S. withdrawal set by President Trump and President Biden, no one should forget that Secretary Rumsfeld announced an end to all major combat on May 1, 2003, and President Bush announced that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended” the same day. This did not prevent President Obama from adding 17,000 more U.S. troops to the 36,000 in the country alongside the 32,000 NATO troops that were already there on February 17, 2009, or deciding to surge some 30,000 more in December 2009 – and this decision came with an announcement that U.S. and NATO forces would begin to withdraw in 2011.

In practice, Figure Eleven shows that the surge in Afghanistan did not produce anything like the benefits of the surge in Iraq. Much of its was wasted fighting a campaign in Helmand and the South that score tactical victories but was one more “win” where there was no real “hold” or “build,” and efforts to bring a new “government in box” did no better than previous efforts. It did nothing to reduce President Obama’s concerns over the Afghan war.

Moreover, the Obama administration scored a victory against an actual terrorist that helped to ease the public image of major cutbacks in U.S. troops, and a decision to limit U.S. combat operations. Bin Laden was killed on May 2, 2011. In June 2011, then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced the U.S. was holding talks with the Taliban, and on June 22, President Obama announced that the U.S. had achieved its main goals by killing many of al-Qaeda’s leaders and scattering its forces, and that U.S. troops would be reduced by 30,000 personnel within the next year and that there would be a complete withdrawal by the end of 2014. The U.S. and NATO did formally end their combat mission in Afghanistan on December 28, 2014, but this did not end actual combat support, their training role, the use of special forces and CIA personnel, or major air support.
Figure Eleven: The Impact of the Surge in Afghanistan versus the Surge in Iraq

The Failure to Create Effective Afghan Forces After 2011

Two additional Figures provide a rough picture of the cycles in the war, and some of the factors that helped to shape the continued inability to create effective Afghan forces from 2011 through 2020. Figure Twelve shows the slow U.S. build-up as the Taliban returned to the field during 2003-2009, the U.S. surge from 2009-2011, and the cuts in U.S. combat troop strength that followed.

Figure Twelve also shows, however, that U.S. and foreign contractors partly compensated such cuts – along with the development of several highly effective elite Afghan land forces and air combat elements that had direct U.S. support. The data here are critical because so many reports only count U.S. combat troops officially deployed to Afghanistan.

In actual practice, Afghan forces remained dependent on U.S. support for virtually all operations, and the total U.S. mix of troop and U.S. foreign contractors increasing total was still close to 40,000 as late as the second quarter of FY2020. It is clear from these data that many of the briefings and press reports on U.S. combat troops after 2015 that talked about some 8,000; 5,000; or 2,000 troops – and ignored the U.S. combat airpower and unreported elements of elite U.S. force – were little more than nonsense in showing the actual level of U.S. support and intervention.

Figure Thirteen shows the patterns in combat operations towards the end of the war, after U.S. and NATO land forces had phased out of direct combat operations, but at the point when the U.S. made a massive commitment of manned and unmanned combat aircraft and deployed the largest mix of tactical reconnaissance aircraft and drones in combat history.

The official data on “Enemy Initiated Attacks” and “Effective Enemy Initiated Attacks,” in this Figure Thirteen do provide a crude indication that Taliban attacks were increasing but were little more than deliberately dishonest public affairs efforts. They do not count the lower level operations that are critical aspects of insurgencies at the local level, do not bear any relation to the totals for Afghan National Army (ANA) operations shown in the same figure which do not reflect support from U.S. and other advisors, and do not indicate the level of support from air power.

Figure Thirteen also shows that massive increase in air support from 2014 through early 2020, when the U.S. suddenly started to classify the data. It grossly understates the level of U.S. support needed to keep the Afghan forces from losing their more serious battles since the data provided on reconnaissance and IS&R missions only include manned sorties and not the major use of unmanned drones.
Figure Twelve: Drop in U.S. Military and Contractor Personnel in Afghanistan After the Shift to Reliance on Afghan Land Forces, Train and Assist Efforts, and U.S. Airpower

Source: Department of Defense “Boots on the Ground” monthly reports to Congress, media reports.

Notes: Reported DOD figures through October 2017 include all active and reserve component personnel physically located in Afghanistan as of the first calendar day of each month.

**Figure Thirteen: Shifts in Afghan Combat Operations**

**Enemy-Initiated Attacks, January 2015–March 2021, in Thousands**

**ASSF Ground Operations by Quarter**

**Number of Weapons Released (Manned & RPA strike assets)**

**Focusing on Tactical Clashes and Ignoring the Insurgency**

What is lacking in U.S. official open source reporting, however, is any serious analysis of the progress the Taliban made in its insurgency campaign – particularly after 2011. There is no analysis of the reasons for which the Taliban was able to return during 2002-2014; of its different tactics in seeking to gain control of given areas; and of its ability to exploit the civil and military weaknesses of the Afghan civil government, local power brokers and factions, the ANDSF, U.S. forces, and allied forces.

Aside from some solid nationwide critiques of the Afghan Army and Air Forces, there is no meaningful analysis of the growing inability of Afghan local security and police forces to respond in spite of a long series of failed efforts at reorganization and changes in leadership. Furthermore, even with the dependence on a few Afghan elite combat units – supported by U.S. airpower and an unreported number of U.S. special forces, SFAB forces, and intelligence personnel – there was an inability to check major Taliban attacks, with a majority ending in strengthening the Taliban presence in the area even when they were defeated.

From 2015 onwards, the U.S. command issued “creative” new metrics whose sole purpose seems to have been showing that the Taliban was losing battles. Like their predecessors in the Vietnam War, these metrics were largely irrelevant from a strategic and grand strategic viewpoint. They did nothing to show the scale of Taliban gains in rural areas, targeted attacks, and money and manpower. Moreover, reporting by SIGAR and the LIG made it all too clear that none of the basic problems in the ANDSF’s dependence on U.S. air power, elite ground elements, and contractors were being solved.

As the following Figures show, reporting of the control of Districts and the level of the threat by area and Province has been erratic and major differences exist by source. The most consistent reporting has been by the *Long War Journal*, which was able to draw upon official reports district-level data by the Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), on assessments by Resolute Support, NATO’s command in Afghanistan, beginning in January 2018.

However, the *Long War Journal* reports that Resolute Support Command gradually changed the assessments to be more favorable to the government. It then stopped issuing open source estimates of whether the Afghan Government controlled contested Districts in April 2019 – as the Taliban gained influence and control – and the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) stated that negotiations with the Taliban, and not the status of Afghanistan’s districts, was the real metric of progress. (See [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/11/analysis-us-military-assessment-of-taliban-control-of-afghan-districts-is-flawed.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/11/analysis-us-military-assessment-of-taliban-control-of-afghan-districts-is-flawed.php)).

This was scarcely the first time that official reporting was altered when the course of the war favored the Taliban. As the *Long War Journal* also notes,

In Nov. 2017, General John W. Nicholson Jr., then commander of Resolute Support and U.S. Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A), said the “most telling” metric for success is “population control” — that is, the percentage of Afghan civilians living in districts dominated by the government, versus those controlled or contested by the jihadists.

Less than a year later, in Oct. 2018, the U.S. discontinued use of that same metric and related ones altogether, arguing it is “of limited decision-making value” to military leaders. Gen. Austin S. Miller, the current commander of Resolute Support and USFOR-A, has said that the goal is to bring about a “political
settlement” to the war. And he is banking on the State Department’s diplomacy with the Taliban, even without any further territorial gains by the government.

The U.S. military’s decision to move the goal posts is discussed in the latest quarterly report by SIGAR, an oversight body that provides “independent and objective” assessments to Congress.

Prior to late 2018, NATO’s Resolute Support, which is led by the U.S. military, had produced “district-level stability” assessments. These analyses counted the number of Afghan districts under government or insurgent “control” and “influence,” while also factoring in the “total estimated population of the district[s]” and the “total estimated area of the districts.”

In mid-January, however, the Defense Department told SIGAR that the assessments “are not indicative of effectiveness of the South Asia strategy or of progress toward security and stability in Afghanistan, particularly in the wake of the appointment of U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad.”

Throughout the war, treating the Taliban as an extremist or terrorist movement seems to have led the U.S. to largely ignore the causes of what was happening in the field, the gains in the insurgency by district and Afghan location, the civil and military reasons for the Taliban’s growing success, and the reasons the Taliban could capitalize so well on the U.S. announcement that it was withdrawing after the start of 2020 and make such quick major gains in controlling and contesting new Districts.

Open source official reporting also systematically downplayed the continuing ANDSF dependence on U.S. airpower, small elite U.S. combat elements, forward deployed U.S. advisors and assistance forces, and the relatively small number of Afghan land combat units they could directly support in actual battles. While the open source reporting involved is largely from media sources, it also increasingly indicated that at least some of the problems were caused by cuts in U.S. and allied forces – and the many problems in the structure and leadership of Afghan forces – paralleled some aspects of the official U.S. Army description of the growing problems in the ARVN after the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.

Media, SIGAR, and LIG reporting after 2019 increasingly indicated that U.S. cuts were creating steadily greater dependence on a small portion of the ANA and ANAF, more problems in allocating reinforcements and supplies, and increasingly isolated small deployments of ANA forces in ways that make them vulnerable. As for Afghan local security and police forces, they had virtually disappeared from much of the countryside after 2002 or became little more than force elements tied to local power brokers which might or may not challenge the Taliban.

It is possible, however, to at least contrast different open source views of how the Taliban threat increased after 2011 and the rising scale of its major gains as of July 2021.

- **Figure Fourteen** shows a generic “terrorist view of the threat” dating back to 2011 – and which continued to be circulated in some form through 2013 – that shows percentages of “enemy initiated attacks” without showing a count of them, and it comes close to equating the Taliban with a number of small and relatively ineffective separate threats, some of which do have extremist and terrorist character.

- **Figure Fifteen** displays a set of goals for increases in Afghan army, police, and local force operations by District in 2012 that border on near fantasy. This was matched by detailed transition plans for the ANDSF to take responsibility for areas controlled by U.S. and allied forces that were issued during 2013 as Taliban coverage of the country and levels of activity increased. It also shows a similarly optimistic estimate of gains in Afghan governance by District in comparison with a steady rise in the threat at the Provincial level.

- **Figure Sixteen** compares a then optimistic Long War Journal estimate of the relative Taliban and government control of Afghanistan based on U.S. command data in 2015 with the far more negative estimates made by the UN – which then ceased to be publicly reported.
• **Figure Seventeen** shows the difference when areas of both Taliban combat and support activity in 2015 are estimated and displayed.

• **Figure Eighteen** shows some of the last official estimates of Long War Journal (https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan) before the data were classified.

• **Figure Nineteen** provides a set of directly comparable Long War Journal maps from November 2017 to late July 2021. A more detailed mapping and estimate of the trends in 2021 – which adds a category for “unconfirmed” Districts and shows control by province and major city – is available at https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan. The LWJ web site noted – as of July 20, 2021 – that with rapid gains in recent days, the Taliban now threatens 16 of Afghanistan’s 34 provincial capitals, while 18 of the provinces in their entirety are under direct threat of falling under Taliban control, according to an ongoing assessment by FDD’s Long War Journal.

Since the Taliban began its offensive after President Joe Biden announced the withdrawal of U.S forces on April 14, the Taliban has more than tripled the number of districts controlled by the group, from 73 to 221. Many of the districts lost to the Taliban are in the north and west, however the Taliban has continued to gain territory in the south and east. The Taliban offensive in the north is designed to undercut Afghan power brokers and warlords in their home districts and provinces. The map… shows an Afghanistan that is at risk of complete collapse if the government and military do not get a handle on the security situation, and quickly.

• **Figure Twenty** shows a different Gandhara estimate of how much – and how quickly – the situation deteriorated from early 2021 to late July 2021, although it should be stressed that official command data remained classified. (https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-support-taliban-afghanistan/31366494.html).

Any final assessment of the pace and nature of the Taliban’s gains from 2002 onwards will require full access to classified official data, and any assessment of final Taliban “victory” will have to be based on the actual outcome of the fighting and the actual political negotiations and settlements that follow. It will also take full access to U.S., NATO/ISAF, and Afghan government classified data – as well as a careful study of Talban claims – to determine the actual growth of Talban forces, the military and civil measures the Talban used to take control by District, and the reasons given Districts altered in vulnerability – if such data even exist.

The maps in Figures Fourteen to Twenty do, however, show the steady rise of the insurgency after U.S. and allied land combat forces officially withdrew in 2014, the steady loss of government control of rural Districts, rise in contested Districts, and that the major losses in 2021 involved years of Talban effort – rather than being sudden and precipitous following U.S. and allied withdrawal as is sometime portrayed.

The work done by Bill Roggio and others for the Long War Journal (LWJ) also deserves special attention and is often the uncredited source of media maps of Talban and Afghan government controlled and contested areas. The LWJ maps are particularly useful because they properly define how they are reported, “controlled” and “contested,” and provide directly comparable maps from 2017 onwards, as well as highly detailed maps of the changes in control from November 2017 onwards. These data are available at https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan.

It also seems likely that Talban forces would have won well before 2021 without U.S. and allied combat support regardless of the theoretical ending of such support in 2014. The SIGAR and LIG reporting on Afghan force development raise critical questions as to whether the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) could have improved to the point where they could actually stand on their own at any point in the next five years unless the Talban became divided or otherwise defeated itself.
Figure Fourteen: A View of the “Terrorist” Threat in 2011
Figure Fifteen: “Mission Impossible” Projected Gains in District Security and Governance vs Growing Taliban Activity in 2010-2012 – I

Source: NATO-ISAF handouts 2012.
Figure Fifteen: “Mission Impossible” – NATO-U.S. Goals for Afghan Forces by District in 2011-2012 – II

Concept of Operations at End 2011

NATO-ISAF Goals for 2012

Source: NATO/ISAF End 2011
Figure Sixteen: Two Different Ways to Measure Taliban Influence in 2015 – I

Long War Journal Estimate on Taliban Control and Contested Districts: 29/9/2015

UN Estimate of Overall Risk from Taliban to Aid Workers 12/10/2015

- Districts with extreme threat levels either have no government presence at all, or a government presence reduced to only the district capital; there were 38 such districts scattered through 14 of the country’s 34 provinces.
- In all, 27 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces had some districts where the threat level was rated high or extreme.

**Figure Seventeen: Contrasting Views of Taliban Influence in 2015 – II**

Institute for Study of War Map of “Zones”: 30/9/2015


Institute for Study of War Map of “Zones:” 4/2015-10/2015

Source: Saagar Enjeti and ISW Afghanistan Team -[https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?shva=1#!inbox/1501a28cd29bdf0e](https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?shva=1#!inbox/1501a28cd29bdf0e).
Figure Eighteen: Contrasting Views of Taliban Influence in 2018

STABILITY LEVEL OF AFGHANISTAN’S 407 DISTRICTS AS OF OCTOBER 22, 2018

Since SIGAR began receiving district-control data in November 2015, Afghan government control and influence over its districts has declined by more than 18 percentage points; contested districts have increased by about 13 points; and insurgent control or influence has risen by about five points. A historical record of district control is shown in Figure 3.31.

RS identified the provinces with the most insurgent-controlled or influence districts as Kunar (five of seven districts), and Uruzgan (four of six districts), and Helmand (nine of 14 districts). DOD reported in December that the provincial centers of all of Afghanistan’s provinces are under Afghan government control or influence. See Figure 3.32, for an RS-provided map showing Afghan government and insurgent control or influence by district.


SIGAR versus Long War Journal Estimates of Taliban Control: May 2018

Notes: U.S. government data is as of May 15, 2018, and analysts’ data is as of May 16, 2018. District boundaries are as of 2014.

Source: ROD NORDLAND, ASH NIGU and FAHIM AKRED, How the U.S. Government Misleads the Public on Afghanistan, New York Times By SEPT. 8, 2018
Figure Nineteen: Long War Journal Maps from 2017 to 2021 – I

Figure Nineteen: Long War Journal Maps from 2017 to 2021 – II
Figure Nineteen: Long War Journal Maps from 2017 to 2021 – III

April 21, 2021

July 20, 2021
Figure Twenty: Gandhara Estimate of the Growing Risk of Taliban Victory in 2021

Gandhara estimate of Taliban captures of Districts from Afghan government forces since the start of the international military withdrawal on May 1, showing changes through July 19, 2021

The Cost of War in Blood and Dollars

The lessons from one final aspect of the fighting does, however, deserve broader attention and raise different issues regarding strategy and the lessons of war. All of the issues that shaped the course of the war also shaped its cost to the U.S., its allies, and the Afghan people. It is striking that there are no official U.S. estimates of the total costs in blood and dollars of the war and civil and military aid to America’s allies or of Afghan casualties and refugees, and there is no credible estimates that emerge from a simple Internet search.

There are no official U.S. estimates of Afghan casualties and refugees, and there are no other reliable data on total Afghan government and security forces, Taliban and other hostile forces, and non-U.S. military and governmental casualties. The Watson Institute at Brown University did estimate in April 2021, however, that some 241,000 people had been killed in the Afghan and Pakistani war zones between 2001 and April 2021, and that 71,000 were civilians (https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians/afghan).

A BBC report in June 2021 noted that President Ghani said in 2019 that more than 45,000 members of the Afghan security forces had been killed since he became president five years earlier, and research by Brown University estimated that deaths in the Afghan national military and police were higher than 64,100 between October 2001 and 2019 (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-47391821). These estimates, however, are very uncertain and do not seem to include many local security forces.

UNAMA estimates that a total of 38,553 Afghans died and 72,311 were injured between the start of its estimates in 2009 through 2020, but many aspects of its estimates are disputed – including its estimates of casualties from U.S. and ANAF air strikes – and UNAMA does not have a credible capability to count low level Taliban killings and injuries of civilians in much of the country. The collection and estimation methods used by both UNAMA and the U.S. are limited and controversial. Estimates are lacking of injured and wounded, and estimates of refugees and displaced periods are rounded guesstimates that often do not cover the entire country and do not count deaths that followed being displaced or that made refugees (https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-04-30qr.pdf, p. 62).

There are, however, detailed estimates of the costs in military casualties to the U.S. alone, and these costs alone raise serious question about the impact of the ways in which the U.S. escalated and prolonged the war. The official Department of Defense estimates of the costs to the U.S. military in terms of killed and wounded seem to be highly reliable – although they do omit U.S. civilians and contractors.

These Department of Defense estimates are divided into two periods which cover the different command structures in the war. The first period covers the length of Operation Enduring Freedom from its official start on October 7, 2001 until the official end of the U.S. role in combat on December 31, 2014. The totals are 1,833 killed in combat, 385 deaths from non-hostile causes and 20,093 wounded in action. The second period covers Resolute Support and shows that the total casualties from December 31, 2014 through July 12, 2021 were far smaller: 66 killed in combat, 30 deaths from non-hostile causes, and 573 wounded in action.

There are no reliable estimates of the dollar cost of total civil and military activity and aid to Afghanistan from all donors from 2001 onwards, although SIGAR reports that the ten top foreign

As for the United States, the U.S. government has never been able to agree on a stable and reliable way to estimate the direct dollar costs of the war, and it only made a brief attempt to issue an official Cost of War report which it never broadly circulated. Figure Twenty-One does, however, provide a SIGAR estimate of the direct financial cost of the war to the U.S. alone through FY budget 2021, and Figure Twenty-Two shows President Biden’s request for future funding in his FY2022 budget request.

These U.S. estimates of direct annual dollar costs involve major uncertainties as to whether the Veteran’s Administration (VA) and other longer-term costs should be included, as to accounting methods, and as to the way in which unrelated baseline and other costs outside Afghanistan should be allocated. They do, however, strongly indicated that the financial cost of the war (and cost in blood and lives) would have been far lower if the U.S. had made a major effort to create independent and self-sustaining Afghan forces from the start.

Far too many recent assessments of the cost of the war to the U.S. have also focused on its total cost from 2001 to the present, and not on the radical shifts in annual costs reflected in Figure Twenty-Two – which shows the slow U.S. reaction to a rising Taliban insurgency, the level of waste resulting from surging added U.S. forces in and then effectively surging them out, and the sharp drop in costs after 2014. They also have ignored the patterns in civil and military spending and the fact that the aid money that went to Afghan civil efforts and building the ANDSF only totaled $131.3 billion –16% of the total of $824.9 billion.

One key lesson of the war’s decisions may be that the U.S. should seek from the start to fully and honestly estimate the costs of war in blood and dollars – not only to itself, but to its allies, the host country, and threat forces. Another is that decisions to continue and escalate conflicts should explicitly consider their costs. A third is the need to focus on building up host country forces and development from the start, to avoid any escalating combat commitments unless critical U.S. national strategic interests are involved, and to be ruthless in making aid conditional on host country governance and military performance.
Figure Twenty-One: The Cost of the War through December 31, 2020 and Projected Budget Through FY2022

Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, First Quarter 2021, p. 34.
**Figure Twenty-Two: OCO Cost of the Afghan War in Terms of Budget Obligations from FY2010 to FY2022 in Current $U.S. Billions**

**Trends in OCO Funding**

($ in Billions)

OFS = Operation Freedom’s Sentinel or Afghan War

**Trends in U.S. Funding of Afghan Forces: FY2020-FY2022**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Budget Activity 6, Afghan National Army (ANA)</th>
<th>FY 2020 Appropriated</th>
<th>FY 2021 Appropriated</th>
<th>FY 2022 Request</th>
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<th>Budget Activity 7, Afghan National Police (ANP)</th>
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<th>Budget Activity 8, Afghan Air Force (AAF)</th>
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<th>FY 2022 Request</th>
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<td><strong>Total Afghan Air Force</strong></td>
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<th>Budget Activity 9, Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF)</th>
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<th>FY 2021 Appropriated</th>
<th>FY 2022 Request</th>
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<td>Training and Operations</td>
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<td><strong>Total Afghan Special Security Forces</strong></td>
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<td><strong>$941,925</strong></td>
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</table>

**Total Afghan National Defense and Security Forces**

|$3,099,078$ | $3,047,612$ | $3,327,830$

Source: OSD Comptroller, FY2022 Budget Justification Data.
The Military Side of the “Hole in Government;” Strategic Jingoism; and Lack of Planning, Effectiveness Measures, and Conditionality

It should also be stressed that any adequate assessment of the war must fully assess the role of allied powers – and the cost to them in blood and dollars – and not just focus on the United States. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) that existed from December 2001 to December 2014 and the NATO Resolute Support Mission (RSM) that followed from the end of 2014 to the present played a critical role in the war.

As Figure Twenty-Three shows, ISAF had over 130,000 troops at its peak, including a total of 51 U.S. and NATO nations – and 43,000 of these troops were allied. Allies also provided their share of reducing forces after 2014: 42 allied countries provided over 32,700 troops. A total of 39 allied countries provided RSM with 6,372 personnel out of 13,199 when it replaces ISAF. A total of 38 allied countries provided RSM with 8,551 military personnel out of 16,551 in February 2020, when the Trump administration announced its deadline for withdrawal. And, 38 allied countries still provided over 8,000 military personnel in February 2021.

Several allied and strategic partners played a significant independent role in ISAF regional commands and/or by providing major combat units. These allies included Britain, Canada, Denmark, France, Georgia, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, Turkey. As Figure Twenty-Three also shows, allied countries also played a major role in providing Provincial Reconstruction Team that were supposed to create a coordinated bridge between the civil and military aid efforts.

At the same time, ISAF and RSM also faced similar planning and coordination problems in the military sector to the problems that UNAMA did in the civil sector, and allies applied different constraints to the use of their forces, used different tactics, and dealt differently in coordinating with civil aid efforts between ANDSF forces and the Afghan civil government.

The U.S. military did do more to tie together U.S. and allied military efforts than U.S. civil departments agencies did to coordinate the civil efforts, but these efforts could not bridge over the different “national constraints” affecting individual ISAF and RSM national forces.

Most official U.S. open source reporting also has its own note of jingoism. It not only ignores allied casualties and costs, it ignores the role of allied forces and the problems that arose for many allied countries in trying to project power so far from their normal operational base, in dealing with governments that limited their operations, and in dealing with different factions of Afghans and the problems in local security and police forces.

In short, the U.S. not only needs to learn from its own military experience, it needs to learn from the experience of its allies and from the role played by NATO, ISAF, and RSM. At the most basic level, it is a form of diplomatic “jingoism” to ignore the roles and sacrifices of one’s allies. It also is a key way of limiting their effectiveness, understanding their limits, and understanding where allied experience and approaches to warfare may be superior.
**Figure Twenty-Three: Allied Forces Contributing to ISAF Mission at Its Peak in January 2012 – I**
Figure Twenty-Three: Allied Forces Contributing to ISAF Mission at Its Peak in January 2012 – II

The Need for Strategic Triage

These figures showing the cost of the war serve another purpose. It is not enough to examine why the war was lost; it is equally critical to examine whether it was worth winning. While no one can predict the ultimate judgments of history, it seems likely that if future historians are asked to judge the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan after the first few months needed to defeat and displace al-Qaeda, it will be that the U.S. “blundered in, blundered on, and blundered out.” It never developed a coherent strategy, pursued different tactical paths with little coherence and consistency, and engaged in a long war without any clear commitment as to its goals.

The issue of whether the U.S. could have won with better strategies, tactics, and programs will almost certainly remain the subject of debate. Recognizing the rise of an insurgency from the start; dealing realistically and conditionally with the critical weaknesses in Afghan politics and governance; focusing from the start on creating self-sustainable Afghan security forces tailored to a counterinsurgency mission; and addressing popular security needs, civil hopes, and expectations at the local and District levels are all possible paths to victory.

They also, however, are uncertain paths as well, and so is the ultimate outcome of the war if any mix of these different paths was taken. U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam was followed by the defeat and collapse of South Vietnam, but then by a Vietnamese war with China and reversal that, to some extent, made Vietnam an ally. The U.S. loss had little or no lasting impact on America’s global strategic position on Cambodia and Laos – the two petty “dominos” that actually did fall along with South Vietnam – but did not produce lasting communist regimes in any real sense of the term.

Throughout the Afghan conflict, U.S. justified its role as a war against terrorism that focused largely on the possibility that a Taliban victory would make Afghanistan the center of some new form of international terrorism which would threaten the U.S., its allies and strategic partners, and its strategic interests. It is still far from clear that any such threat will emerge, or that the Taliban will support any such efforts that do not support its own local regional interests and the flow of outside support and aid.

The United States never clearly focused on the value of the objective – which is always a key element of grand strategy. Some regional experts did make cases at least through 2014 for a strong U.S. presence in Afghanistan as a way of winning a broad strategic presence in Central and South Asia and for triggering a new age of economic and political development. Claims were made about its value as a “new silk road,” route for pipelines, and the value of mining its minerals. All, however, had hopelessly positive estimates of cost-benefits, ignored key regional political and security issues, and were largely ignored or used as political cosmetics at the policy level.

Ironically, when it came to the “war” that was fought against actual terrorism, the U.S. and its allies and partners simultaneously engaged in a far broader battle against active extremist and terrorist threats from non-state actors in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere in the world that it largely “won.” Small amounts of U.S. civil and military aid and small cadres of special forces, intelligence personnel, and U.S. supported allied forces were able to either contain or defeat the threat. U.S. diplomatic efforts to create new international efforts to limit and defeat terrorism did produce major benefits, as did a focus on helping other states develop better civil and paramilitary approaches to defeating terrorism and extremism. To some extent, the U.S. was successful in fighting the real war against active terrorist and extremist non-state actors while it failed to win the counterinsurgency war against the Taliban.
At the same time, there were many other strategic objectives where the U.S. was not successful, and the resources used in the Afghan War might have produced real strategic benefits. The U.S. did a relatively poor job of coping with the political upheavals that occurred in the MENA region after 2011, both in military and civil terms. It invaded Iraq for all the wrong reasons, and while it was more successful (twice) in defeating a stronger set of threats from a mix of extreme Sunni resistance movements and then ISIS, it was no more successful in dealing with Iraq’s civil, political, governance, and development problems than it was in Afghanistan. It never developed effective approaches to supporting reform elements in much of the Arab world, and it never had effective strategies for dealing with the civil wars in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia.

Elsewhere in the world, the U.S. had some success in dealing with different forms of terrorism in Colombia, but only marginal success in dealing with other “failed” states in Latin America, Africa, and Asia – many of which were far more important to the U.S. in strategic terms than Afghanistan. In many cases, the aid the U.S. provided to allied efforts to deal with these problems did have some value, but any review of the rankings the UN, World Bank, IMF, and a host of NGOs given on stability in the developing world in 2021 relative to 2020 is a warning that many such challenges are now far greater – again in areas of more direct strategic interest to the United States.

Accordingly, the key issue in learning from the Afghan War may not be whether the U.S. could have been far more effective in this war, but rather the fact that the U.S. never honestly came to grips with the strategic value of the mission, of Afghanistan, of its role in Central Asia, and of its other strategic interests. The U.S. engaged in a steadily growing conflict for a decade between 2001 and 2011, and then continued to fight for ten more years. During that time, it never really assessed the comparative value of the war – and its cost – relative to other uses of the same resources, its strategic alliances and partners, and the development and humanitarian impact other uses of the aid to other countries might have accomplished.

A global power must engage in strategic triage. It must make hard choices in how it uses the resources in can devote to its global engagements in the ways that have the most productive results. As Hans Morgenthau pointed out nearly a decade ago, the U.S. cannot be engaged in crusades that ignore the real value of the objective and turn its international efforts into the equivalent of morality plays. There will always be more need than the U.S. can meet and more suffering than it can deal with. Like medical triage, the key objective in strategic triage is never where the wound is most serious, it is always where treatment can do the most good. Here, the judgment of history is likely to be far more predictable than any judgment as to whether the U.S. could have won. Like a poor gambler, the U.S. clearly committed far more resources than the war was worth.