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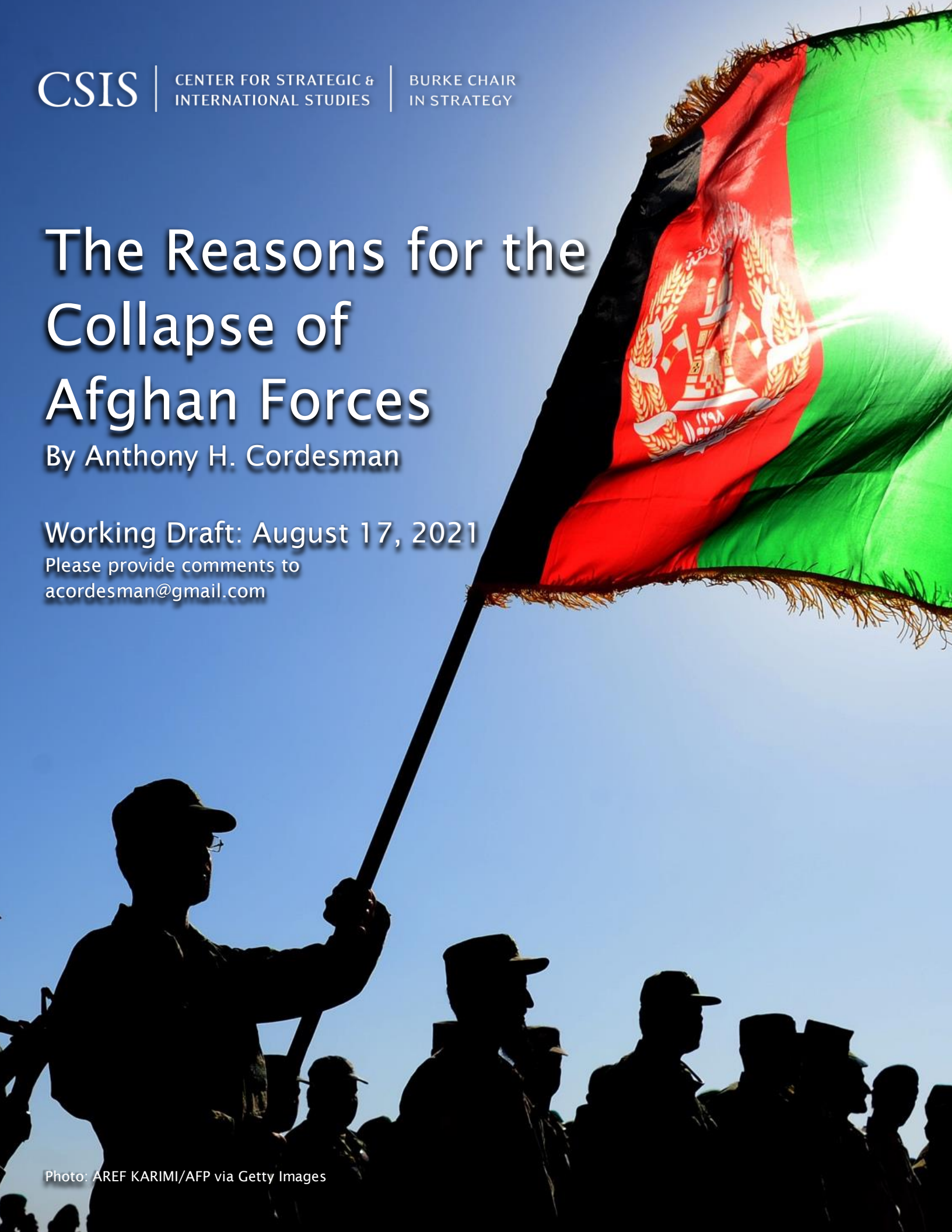
The Reasons for the Collapse of Afghan Forces

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Anthony H. Cordesman

The sudden collapse of the Afghan central government and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) has occurred with stunning speed. It has clearly been driven by the fact that both President Trump and President Biden not only announced deadlines for the withdrawal of U.S. military support, but they then cut that support to levels where Afghan forces could not survive and where many Afghan politicians and government figures were willing to stand aside or surrender.

It also, however, is the collapse of a house of cards that took some twenty years to build and that was driven as much by failures at the civil level as the military level. It is a bipartisan failure, and one that was ultimately driven by a U.S. inability to provide objective and effective assessments of the developments in the Afghan government it was trying to aid and of the Taliban threat.

This analysis attempts to list the many factors that made both defeat and a sudden collapse possible, and it attempts to make it clear that any valid analysis must examine all of these factors and not simply the events that have taken place in the months since President Trump first set a deadline for U.S. and allied withdrawals in February 2020 or during the weeks in July and August 2021 that gave the Taliban control over most of the country.

It does highlight a wide range of issues and actions for which the U.S. must take responsibility, but it also highlights the fact that many of the failures were caused by Afghans. It also focuses on a lesson that is all too clear from other successful insurgencies that range from the rise of communism in Russia and China to the collapse of Vietnam – and most other successful insurgencies since the end of World War II. No outside power can help a failed government that cannot help itself.

Putting the Analysis in Context

There are five key points that need to be made clear in introducing this analysis and that put its conclusions in context:

1. First, there was no one cause of the Taliban victory and the sudden collapse of the Afghan government and its forces. There were many. Key causes can be identified in broad terms, but adequate unclassified data are not available to fully assess them, and there is no clear way as of yet to measure their relative individual importance.
2. Second, many of the data on the failures of the Afghan government and forces as well as on the level of U.S. understanding of the Taliban – that are necessary to fully address the causes of what has happened – are classified. In contrast, all too many of the data in open source official reporting are colored by spin, propaganda, and false claims of success. It may be months or years before the full range of classified data become clear and available – even if such data are actually preserved and ever made openly available.
3. Third, the reasons for the collapse of both Afghan governance and Afghan forces have to be studied over a timeline of two decades. They trace back to the beginning of the U.S. effort to create effective Afghan governance and security forces, and they are not the product of recent developments, battles, or set of political decisions.

4. Fourth, partisan politics – and a rush to prove some given theory about the cause of the collapse – have already begun to do far more to obscure the real causes of the U.S. failures in Afghanistan as well as the sudden collapse of the Afghan government and its forces, than to explain them. Partisanship and ideological rushes to judgment also disguise the fact that there are no reliable open source data as of yet on the extent to which both the Trump and Biden administrations concluded there was no real prospect that the Afghan government and forces could stand on their own, initiated peace negotiations they knew would probably fail, had no actual plans for either a peace or a successful and stable Afghanistan, and chose to withdraw regardless of the consequences.
5. Fifth, the sudden catalytic collapse of defense efforts – and of governments and military forces facing major insurgencies – has occurred on many other occasions in military history. Such collapses have rarely been clearly predictable until their final stages, and the actual process of collapse has often been more a matter of sudden shifts in the perceptions and attitudes of leaders, commanders, and security forces than measurable causes or a direct outcome of the fighting. Sudden catalytic collapse is a contingency that is often possible but not necessarily probable, and the combination of factors that leads to it becoming the actual outcome is not something that the actors involved can foresee until it actual happens.

Key Factors Leading to the Collapse

That said, it is clear that each of the following factors helped to drive the sudden collapse of most of the Afghan central government and the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces by mid-August 2021. Many, in fact most, of these factors had begun to shape the war in Afghanistan by the end of 2002, and almost all had a growing impact years before the Trump or Biden cuts began in U.S. forces that also led to cuts in allied forces and contractors.

1. Announcing the withdrawal was a key factor that led the Taliban to act.

That said, U.S. decisions to withdraw did have a major impact. President Obama's decision to "withdraw" in 2014 was followed by the collapse of much of the civil aid effort as well as the growing limits imposed on the U.S. train and assist effort supporting Afghan military forces – although enough U.S. and allied forces remained to keep Taliban forces from taking provincial capitals and winning full control over large numbers of local District governments.

The full record behind President Trump and President Biden's decisions to fully withdraw is far from clear, but both President Trump and President Biden announced deadlines for complete withdrawal without tying such withdrawals to any progress in a peace plan, and both administrations took actions to free Taliban prisoners and reduce U.S. and allied forces without serious negotiations; without any clear peace plan; and without any picture of what kind of Afghan government or political, social, and economic structure would emerge from any such peace.

The Trump administration's February 2020 peace agreement traded withdrawal for negotiations, but it never defined a possible peace and never created an effective peace process. In doing so, it sent signals to Afghan officials and the Afghan military that the U.S. had concluded that it had effectively "lost" Afghanistan by announcing what amounted to complete U.S. withdrawal:

The United States is committed to withdraw from Afghanistan all military forces of the United States, its allies, and Coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel within fourteen (14) months following announcement of this agreement, and will take the following measures in this regard:

1. The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will take the following measures in the first one hundred thirty-five (135) days:
 - 1) They will reduce the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan to eight thousand six hundred (8,600) and proportionally bring reduction in the number of its allies and Coalition forces.
 - 2) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will withdraw all their forces from five (5) military bases.
2. With the commitment and action on the obligations of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban in Part Two of this agreement, the United States, its allies, and the Coalition will execute the following:
 - 1) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will complete withdrawal of all remaining forces from Afghanistan within the remaining nine and a half (9.5) months.
 - 2) The United States, its allies, and the Coalition will withdraw all their forces from remaining bases.

The Trump administration then put the U.S. on the path to cutting the unclassified total of U.S. military personnel from some 10,000 to 8,600 to 2,500; cutting contractors, civilians, and allied forces to match; and shutting bases and facilities. These actual and planned cuts were serious enough – coupled to freeing Taliban prisoners – to be a major incentive for the Taliban to prepare a national offensive and persuade many Afghan officials and officers that the U.S. and allied forces were leaving and that they would be forced to deal with the Taliban.

The cuts in the U.S. and allied presence continued and accelerated after President Biden's inauguration on January 20, 2020, although no progress had been made in substantive negotiations and no side had advanced anything approaching a credible peace plan. President Biden then announced on April 14, 2021, that the U.S. would withdraw from Afghanistan in September 2021:

With the terror threat now in many places, keeping thousands of troops grounded and concentrated in just one country at a cost of billions each year makes little sense to me and to our leaders. We cannot continue the cycle of extending or expanding our military presence in Afghanistan, hoping to create ideal conditions for the withdrawal, and expecting a different result...I'm now the fourth United States President to preside over American troop presence in Afghanistan: two Republicans, two Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility on to a fifth.

After consulting closely with our allies and partners, with our military leaders and intelligence personnel, with our diplomats and our development experts, with the Congress and the Vice President, as well as with Mr. Ghani and many others around the world, I have concluded that it's time to end America's longest war. It's time for American troops to come home.

When I came to office, I inherited a diplomatic agreement, duly negotiated between the government of the United States and the Taliban, that all U.S. forces would be out of Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, just three months after my inauguration. That's what we inherited — that commitment.

It is perhaps not what I would have negotiated myself, but it was an agreement made by the United States government, and that means something. So, in keeping with that agreement and with our national interests, the United States will begin our final withdrawal — begin it on May 1 of this year.

We will not conduct a hasty rush to the exit. We'll do it — we'll do it responsibly, deliberately, and safely. And we will do it in full coordination with our allies and partners, who now have more forces in Afghanistan than we do. And the Taliban should know that if they attack us as we draw down, we will defend ourselves and our partners with all the tools at our disposal.

Our allies and partners have stood beside us shoulder-to-shoulder in Afghanistan for almost 20 years, and we're deeply grateful for the contributions they have made to our shared mission and for the sacrifices they have borne...The plan has long been "in together, out together." U.S. troops, as well as forces deployed by our NATO Allies and operational partners, will be out of Afghanistan before we mark the 20th anniversary of that heinous attack on September 11th.

President Biden then announced on April 14, 2021 that, "We achieved those objectives. Bin Laden is dead and al-Qaida is degraded in Afghanistan, and it's time to end this forever war," and he announced on July 8, 2021 that,

Our military mission in Afghanistan will conclude on August 31st. The drawdown is proceeding in a secure and orderly way, prioritizing the safety of our troops as they depart... Our military commanders advised me that once I made the decision to end the war, we needed to move swiftly to conduct the main elements of the drawdown. And in this context, speed is safety.

If both the Trump and Biden administrations were not committed to full withdrawal by their stated date, there should have been some historical record showing they had some sort of viable peace plan – and plan to deal with its consequences or failure. So far, there is no hint that this was the case.

Moreover, any assessment of the relative impact of the Trump and Biden administrations must be based on a full and accurate timeline of decisions and actual cuts to every aspect of U.S. military and civil support. At present, however, open source official statements and briefings only involve virtually, meaningless numbers of openly deployed military personnel. They do not explain or provide an accurate chronology of the functional impact of such cuts and changes in bases and facilities, cuts in forward deployed support, cuts in unreported troop and intelligence deployments, cuts in intelligence and air support, cuts in civil governance and aid efforts, and cuts in funding. Given the dismal record of honest open source reporting in all these areas to date and the incentives for partisan exploitation of selected "facts," it is far from clear that such a record will ever be available.

2. ***Throughout the long history of the war in Afghanistan, the failures of the Afghan government were driven by poor and deeply divided leadership at the top; divisions among political leaders; corruption and self-seeking politics at every civil and military level down to District Capitals and road check points; and constant changes in organization, force plans, goals, officials, and commanders.***

Poor leadership at the civil level, from the top of the government down, that began almost immediately after the new Afghan government took over from the Taliban, did as much to weaken the efforts to create effective Afghan National Defense and Security Forces as any military mistakes. In many ways, the politics, corruption, and incompetence of both the civil and military side of the Afghan government was at least as serious of an enemy to that government as the Taliban.

They created self-inflicted wounds that went far deeper than the central government in Kabul. They affected virtually all of the 34 Provincial capitals, other major urban areas, and the 387 local "District" and 34 "provincial center Districts" (421 Districts) in Afghanistan. Reform and anti-corruption efforts had token and temporary impacts at best.

If anything, failed governance and corruption increased at the lower levels of governance and security operations over time, and the problems created by local power brokers and warlords as well as the ethnic, sectarian, and tribal divisions increased either in terms of tension or local separatism.

It is also clear from cutbacks in U.S., NATO, and UN reporting that the understanding of these issues at the local level declined with time as civil and security aid efforts were cut and the presence of civil, military, and intelligence experts declined from 2013-2014 onwards. Open source reporting on the quality of District governance and aid efforts largely ended in 2015, and UN public reporting on areas with aid workers were ceased as more and more areas became insecure. The human intelligence collection effort on District and Provincial governance, popular attitudes, and Taliban activities (other than actual attacks) seems to have declined, but no unclassified assessments are available.

What is clear from open source media reporting is that local forms of corruption, including narcotrafficking, became more and more serious at the Provincial, District, and Urban levels as the outside aid presence and funds did actually decline. Moreover, the former war lords of the Northern alliance increasingly became power brokers that often used their “forces” to maintain authoritarian control, but they ceased to maintain them as anything like effective military forces.

It is equally clear that the legal system, policing, and local security forces were also a growing source of corruption and extortion to the extent they actually functioned, and a growing number of Districts ceased to have effective governance outside the District capital – if there was any.

What is unclear from open source data, whether any reliable and official detailed reporting or records exist that cover these problems or trends, is how broadly any such reporting was distributed, and what policy level assessments were made from the impact of these problems in the Afghan government side relative to the actions and growth of Taliban influence.

3. ***Deep divisions existed between the civil and military efforts in aid, development, and leadership.***

The civil and military aid efforts of the U.S., other donor states, and United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) were never properly coordinated, and efforts to create integrated civil-military plans never became effective. The U.S. talked about “whole of government” plans but never developed effective planning efforts – much less implemented them. Funding on the civil side of aid rose massively from 2004-2011, and then was slashed – although the Afghan government continued to get massive aid for both its civil and military programs almost regardless of how well they met Afghan needs.

This helped to ensure that the Afghan government failed to develop the level of political unity it needed at every, led to many unsuccessful development efforts, and helped to lead to a steady rise in poverty levels and the deterioration of many aspects of Afghan life – particularly after 2013-2014. In the process, it helped to open up many areas to Taliban influence.

At the same time, the civil leadership of the Afghan government often misallocated Afghan forces to meet their own political priorities or protect their own economic interests. Their conflicting civil priorities also led to constant changes in command and in various aspects of the Afghan force build-up and military operations in ways that did nothing to produce the improvement Afghan forces needed.

4. ***Afghanistan remained a narcostate to a high degree, and the Taliban gradually came to earn more money from mines than the government.***

More broadly, the Afghan government remained dependent on outside aid for some 80% of its income, and it saw narcotrafficking become Afghanistan's one major export – and one that bypassed the government's sources of income. It wasted much of this money on creating an inflated and corrupt structure, while the Taliban could finance its operations far more cheaply, draw from local sources and extortion, and spend almost all of its money on its goals and operations rather than corruption. Moreover, the Taliban increasingly obtained arms and military supplies from Afghan forces and government sources.

The Taliban also raised substantial money from civil sources. SIGAR reports that the Taliban became the main operator of what remained a small mining industry. Open source United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) and other reporting on the Afghan narcotics industry focus on the volume of growth, seizures, and areas of growth. However, it seems clear that the Taliban at least competed with power brokers for illicit narcotics export income, and that it benefited from such income while the Afghan government got nothing from the income earned by other narcotraffickers and power brokers.

It is unclear how much of the duties and fees paid at border crossings got to the government, but by 2020, the Taliban may have gotten substantial local income from extortion and road checkpoints. The local authorities and security/border forces carrying out similar levels of extortion kept the money.

5. ***From at least 2007 and onward, the U.S., NATO, and Afghan government increasingly denied the existence of critical problems in the organization, training, equipment, and leadership of Afghan forces, and they reported levels of success in both force development and in combat in the open source reporting that were clearly untrue.***

On paper, the number of Afghan forces generally increased after the February 2020 peace agreement. The total military and police forces rose from 272,807 in October 2019 to 307,947 in January 2021, dropping to 300,699 in April 2021 – before the collapse began. However, the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan Air Forces (AAF) only accounted for 176,019 in October 2019 to 186,859 in January 2021, rising to 182,071 in April 2021.

Roughly 40% of the total consisted of Afghan National Police (ANP) whose forces varied sharply in quality, were largely conventional police, and could not play an effective paramilitary role or properly hold even supposed secure areas. These ANP totaled 96,788 in October 2019; 121,088 in January 2021; dropping to 118,628 in April 2021. Some fought bravely in the period before U.S. force cuts began, but most collapsed or deserted in the face of any serious Taliban action, and significant numbers deserted or changed sides when the Taliban took control over a given District.

The importance of these problems accelerated following the withdrawal of most U.S. forces in 2014. When aid spending on both civil and military development crashed after

peaking in FY2010-FY2012, the U.S. stopped reporting – or classified information – in many areas as the data became more negative and to disguise the growing problems in Afghanistan. The flow of actual pay remained a problem that grew in the Afghan police over time, and even the flow of rations and basic supplies became a problem in some areas.

Efforts to create effective local forces collapsed, and the remnants of local forces were folded into the police. As noted earlier, the various militias run by given power brokers largely lost their warfighting capabilities and became tools that given power brokers used to enforce their authority.

The quality of Afghan forces and governance was another self-inflicted wound.

6. ***The actual combat ready core of Afghan Army forces was very small, grossly overburdened with combat assignments, and forced to fight at unsustainable levels. These problems were compounded by dependence on active U.S. intelligence, combat troop support, airpower, and contractors.***

To an extent, the U.S. turned the open source reporting on Afghan force development and its progress relative to the Taliban into denial, public relations spin, and the equivalent of a liar's contest – rather than focusing on the real course of the fighting and real progress in force development. Public reporting on the level of Afghan dependence on U.S. military support and allied train and assist efforts was sharply curtailed over time, and then altered to create false metrics of success.

Quarterly reporting to Congress by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and the Lead Inspector General (LIG) did flag many of these issues, but their seriousness and the trends involved were ignored or deliberately misrepresented at the policy level and by military spokespersons.

There were many brave and competent officers and soldiers, but most Army units were not manned by competent officers and soldiers – many of which only enlisted because there was no other source of jobs. They had only limited combat capability, and far too much of the official Executive Branch and command reporting – reported in depth by the media – concealed the fact that only a few elite units and a small portion of the Army were actually capable of rapid deployment and effective war fighting.

Executive Branch and command reporting also understated the degree that even these forces were dependent on U.S. support from air strikes, elite cadres of U.S. land troops, and intelligence advisors at the forward advisory level. As was the case with the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) after the U.S. withdrawal, the claimed personnel levels could be uncertain, desertions were not properly reported, and pay could be uncertain. Worse, combat assignments could be highly political, and the flow of ammunition, supplies, and reinforcements was poorly managed with a tendency to hoard at higher command levels or by nearby units.

The few Afghan Army and Air Forces units that were highly effective were also increasingly stressed by excessive combat assignments as well as by political allocation to other assignments of marginal value. Only a small fraction of the 182,071 personnel supposedly in the Army and Air Force could be used effectively, and the total force suffered a 25% annual turnover rate due to losses and desertions by 2020.

These weaknesses were disguised – up to a point – by sending U.S. elite forces and intelligence personnel to support the elite Afghan combat units and by the deployment of specialized train and assist personnel. Once again, the numbers of such personnel and their exact role remains classified, although it is clear that ongoing cuts from February 2020 onwards – that accelerated after the new withdrawal deadline set by President Biden – helped to cripple even some of the most effective Afghan Army units.

The small Afghan Air Force did its best, but it was far too small and limited in strike and intelligence capability to sustain Afghan Army units on its own – as well as in tandem with the Afghan Army capability to call for and properly target air strikes to begin to replace U.S. and allied airpower. Here again, some statements by U.S. military spokespersons greatly exaggerated its real-world capability.

Moreover, far too little progress was made in the Afghan Army and Air Force in creating forces that could operate without U.S. and foreign contractors – either in sustaining combat operation or in maintaining equipment. Again – as was the case in a far better educated and more technically advanced ARVN – the Afghan Army was equipped with systems and weapons that were too sophisticated for a force lacking technical background, exposure to modern equipment and tools, and often functional literacy.

Equally important, reporting on Afghan police forces and local security forces deliberately disguised the near total failure to create police or local forces that were effective in holding given regions and that were not corrupt and predatory – often creating a political climate in given parts of the countryside where the people turned to a Taliban justice system.

This was further compounded by the excessive use of checkpoints on given roads – and the procedures at border crossings – that often involved bribes and extortion and that ignored the fact that the Taliban had often set up their own checkpoints and extortion centers – resulting in the government slowly losing control of key roads and doing little more than securing the main city or capitol of many Districts that were rated as under government control.

7. ***Giving Afghan forces equipment and support structures that made them indefinitely dependent on contractors and secure contractor facilities.***

The U.S. did not simply downplay the level of Afghan dependence on U.S. combat support and train and assist material, it failed to state the degree to which it had repeated the problems in transferring equipment too sophisticated for ARVN and the over sophisticated support systems to maintain it that were created in Vietnam.

Once again, SIGAR and LIG did report on these problems, and it is clear that much of the problems inside Afghan forces came from getting over-complex systems and contractors support systems which made it acutely vulnerable to U.S. withdrawals in ways where it is unclear that policymakers fully understood and which had nothing to do with the reported levels of U.S. and allied military personnel deployed in Afghanistan.

8. ***The U.S. – and NATO and allied forces – as a result, never fully realized they were dealing with an increasingly successful Taliban insurgency rather than a Taliban military and terrorist threat.***

U.S. official open source reporting consistently underestimated the sophistication and capability of the Taliban. It ignored its history as a political movement and force created

in part by the Pakistani ISI and the fact that it had actually governed most of Afghanistan with some success. It focused on the favorable outcome of direct military battles, emphasized the Taliban's character as an extremist and terrorist movement, and ignored its development and growth as a broad insurgency and its growing impact as a political and ideological movement.

In contrast, a wide range of outside analyses –including work by SIGAR as well as Bill Roggio and others of the *Long War Journal* – warned that the Taliban was making serious gains in rural areas and Districts. The U.S.-led military effort, however, focused on the outcome of military clashes – particularly Enemy Initiated Attacks (EIAs) – rather than the growth of Taliban influence and control in the countryside and the ability to strike selectively inside Afghan cities and populated areas.

Many serving U.S. officers understood what was happening, but the main emphasis of U.S. efforts after 2014 continued to focus on using elite Afghan forces; U.S. and allied train and assist personnel; U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (IS&R) assets; and air strikes. It focused on directly defeating Taliban forces when they overtly attacked key populated areas, rather than achieving political influence, effective governance, and security by the police and local forces at the District level and outside the main populated areas involved.

Looking back at open source official reporting, there is no indication that serious efforts were being made on a District by District level to understand what the Taliban were doing to expand their influence and control, as distinguished from analyzing overt military clashes with Taliban forces and the number of EIAs. It is equally unclear that much attention was paid to the possibility that Taliban forces should be counted by the large number of potential volunteers rather than relying on loose guesses of 40,000 to 60,000 fighters or in understanding the improvements taking place in Taliban equipment, training, leadership, and combat experience.

Moreover, open source reporting was dominated by the tacit assumption that the Taliban's extremism made it sufficiently so politically unpopular that the Afghan Government would always be seen as the force given popular support. This was probably true in many areas, but it reflects a naïve and unrealistic approach to insurgent warfare. "Winning hearts and minds" can be useful, but the history of successful insurgencies is largely the history of winning control over the population, often by ruthless and unforgiving means.

The history of insurgent warfare is also a history where overt government military victories do not matter if the end result leaves the insurgent force with added control and if the government becomes steadily more isolated and ineffective at the local level. Insurgencies, popular warfare, and irregular warfare are not humanitarian exercises. They use the population as instruments of war.

These failures not only led to a steady and slowly accelerating rise in Taliban control of given districts after 2014, they led to the massive underestimation of rising Taliban influence in rural areas and the country as a whole.

They helped to enable the Taliban to adopt a strategy where they could exploit the lack of effective local militias in the North and in the inherent vulnerability of large population centers which required large active troop levels and air strikes to defend – and where the

Taliban developed the ability to both deploy forces relatively rapidly and focus on the internal political vulnerabilities of the government and local security forces.

The end result was a steady rise in Taliban influence and control from at least 2016 onwards, which helped to create a situation where post February 2000 peace agreement cuts in U.S and allied forces and contractors; in bases and facilities; and in ties to Afghan units in the field and at the operational level of force allocation, reinforcements, support, and logistics made the relatively small number of effective Afghan combat units less and less able to cope with either winning battles or preventing the Taliban from taking control of given districts.

The Taliban also was steadily more able to exploit the weaknesses and divisions in Afghan officials and security forces, use bribery to obtain its goals, focus on intimidating key individuals or killing them, and create plans to threaten and bribe key officials and officers to surrender or fail to fight as the impact of U.S. and allied withdrawals became clear. The Taliban coupled insurgent warfare with political warfare, and it exploited Afghan corruption, personal ambition, and individual weaknesses as political weapons with steadily greater skill and coordination at a national level – this became a major factor in the collapse of the Afghan government and forces as well as in the ability to exploit the weakest links in Afghan local and urban defenses and leadership

As in Vietnam, U.S. aided forces won virtually every battle against the Taliban, but steadily lost the countryside and much of the country – and the small number of effective Afghan forces could not continue to win as active U.S. military support declined.

9. *Coming to rely on cities and protecting population centers in ways that made them giant targets.*

It is still unclear why U.S. planners thought that ceding much of the countryside and securing Afghanistan's major cities could work. Every major city was dependent on trade and food imports, and it involved large sprawling areas with a wide range of secondary and other roads as well as limited natural defenses. Each was also to some extent a "Potemkin city" dependent on major outside aid – with large numbers of new residents coming from rural areas as well as young men and women entering the job market in a country that lagged in almost every aspect of economic development.

While Afghanistan did increase its modern urban sector from 2002 onwards, it did not enhance its popular support through adequate economic development or the real growth of the private sector or job creation. Urban modernization was aid and government spending driven. It created a major youth unemployment problem, and often made some form of corruption the only way a family could afford something approaching a middle-class urban life.

Major increases took place in the size and population of urban areas, although there are no fully credible figures for such growth. What is clear is that they were not sustained by internal development, but by outside aid spending, creating highly vulnerable and weak security islands in a land locked country where the Taliban steadily gained control of the road and the areas outside the cities.

As time went on, the deteriorating security situation also led to a steadily stronger U.S. emphasis on defending population centers at the expense of the countryside, without

seeming to consider how the cities could function without access to the countryside, trade, imports-exports, and defense of key infrastructure facilities outside the urban area.

As noted above, the elite Afghan forces that could actually fight were far too small and too limited in mobility and sustainability to defend all of these population centers, many of which were controlled by power brokers and lacked police and other forces loyal to the central government. It was never clear how the cities could survive on their own even if the Taliban did not attack them or how they could defend themselves without effective paramilitary police and local security force.

10. ***Finally, it should again be stressed that the focus on active combat with the Taliban, in dealing with U.S. and allied withdrawals, and on the potential peace negotiations seems to have led to a lack of focus on the Taliban's strategy and the fact it was preparing for major offensive in the North and elsewhere in the country.***

The Taliban's shift to major offensive operations in the northern, non-Pashtun areas clearly took the Afghan government and U.S. by surprise. From roughly 2002 onwards, the U.S., its allies, and the Afghan government were fighting an insurgency – not a war against terrorism. The implications of the need to focus on insurgency do not seem to have reached the military, civil, or senior policy levels.

Moreover, the almost unconscious denial of the Taliban's character and progress was a steadily more critical factor the moment the U.S. first chose to talk tangibly about withdrawal during the period before the February 2020 peace agreement was announced and seemingly did so without ever defining or proposing a credible peace.

And, this same substitution of denial for valid analysis seems to have led the U.S. and other intelligence assessments to grossly underestimate the Taliban's ability to communicate – and to carry out and coordinate – complex operations throughout Afghanistan, redeploy or concentrate forces with limited warning, and execute the mix of operations and attacks that helped to catalyze and then exploit the collapse of the Afghan government and its forces. At least at the time from which the Taliban took Kabul, this seemed to be a massive intelligence failure.

After the Collapse: Acting Effectively and Learning the Right Lessons

At this point, U.S. policy needs to focus on two goals:

- ***The first is finding any ways possible to persuade the Taliban to act with some degree of moderation and to create a stable aftermath that can protect the Afghan people as much as possible. Here, it is critical to emphasize that humanitarian aid only buys time and solves nothing.***

It is equally critical to emphasize that military threats may work in limiting any Taliban tolerance of international terrorism outside the region, but that aid money, diplomatic recognition, trade, and investment are the only tools likely to modify Taliban behavior and actions, and they will now probably have to be provided on largely Taliban terms.

- ***The second is to learn from this long list of mistakes, draw fully on classified data as well as open source material in doing so, and carry out such analysis on a non-partisan basis and in ways that bluntly speak truth to power: To the President, the Congress, the State Department, USAID, and the U.S. military.***

Here, it is important to note that think tanks, NGOs, and other outside organizations can help, but this requires experience, access to practitioners, and probably at least two to three years of effort.

The United States should be careful not to lose the expertise and objectivity that SIGAR has developed in these areas, nor should it repeat the mistakes it made in not retaining the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) or even giving it an effective website for its past work after the supposed U.S. defeat of extremism in Iraq in 2011 – timed in ways where no similar analytic body existed to report on the fighting against ISIS.

The U.S. may not want to repeat long wars, counterinsurgency efforts, or dealing with fragile and failed states. It cannot afford, however, to ignore the lessons it should learn or the near certainty that a world as unstable as this one will certainly mean that it will have no choice but to engage in similar conflicts in the future.