

Learning the Right Lessons from the Afghan War

By Anthony H. Cordesman

With the Assistance of Grace Hwang

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Please provide comments and suggested changes
and revisions to acordesman@gmail.com



Introduction

The U.S. has a poor history of making effective efforts to learn the lessons of its recent wars, and it is already focusing on other strategic issues, and the crises that are following the collapse of Afghanistan. It will be all too easy for U.S. policymakers and the Congress to ignore the need to learn from the preceding twenty years of conflict and to fail to preserve the data and institutions necessary to learn as much from the war and the collapse of the Afghan government and forces as possible.

The U.S. also has a long history of learning too little and too late. The U.S. failed to provide a timely analysis of the lessons of the Vietnam War, although outside historians and analysts have since written some excellent work, and the later volumes of the 33 volumes in the U.S. Army's official history of the Vietnam War eventually covered many key areas in depth. For example, Jeffrey J. Clarke's *Advice and Support: The Final Years, 1965-1973* should be required reading for every officer and official going to both Iraq and Afghanistan, although it clearly suffered from a lack of full access to sensitive data that never became public after the war.

The U.S. made similar mistakes in learning from the first Gulf War. It rushed out a report to Congress called the [*Conduct of The Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress*](#) that grossly exaggerated the level of success as a result of using airpower, understated the problems in creating an effective coalition, did not address the serious intelligence and policy mistakes that led to premature conflict termination without the proper conditions for withdrawal, failed to address the legacy and relevant lessons of the Iran-Iraq War, and failed to examine the post-conflict costs of failing to have an effective plan for conflict termination. Some outside analysts have since written excellent studies, and separate efforts by bodies like the U.S. Air Force Studies and Analyses Agency (AFSAA) have corrected some of the mistakes in the first official lessons report, but many of the data and facts have been lost and ignored.

The U.S. also made these mistakes in dealing with its invasion of Iraq in 2003. It never properly analyzed the lessons from its failures to properly justify the need for an invasion or to prepare for the outcome of a successful invasion. It then enabled the effort led by the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) collapse after 2011, did not create any official independent body to replace SIGIR to learn from the war, let much of the official open source data disappear from the web, and never established a process for declassifying masses of data that would have helped analysts and historians learn the right lessons with as much information as possible.

More broadly, none of these official assessments of the lessons of war seriously addressed the emergence of post-conflict regimes or the relative level of security and stability they created. They did not address the civil and military lessons on how conflicts actually terminate, and they did not cover how wartime decisions impact the final outcome.

Giving Priority to the “Blame Game” and Partisan Divisions and Debate

This failure to learn can easily be repeated in the case of Afghanistan. Yet another failure to create an adequate official effort to study the lessons of the war will be encouraged by the fact that the U.S. must focus on major domestic challenges because of the Covid-19 crisis and on other national security challenges like a growing focus on strategic competition with China and Russia that now borders on open confrontation. It will be further encouraged by the fact that the collapse of the present Afghan government and Afghan National Self Defense Forces (ANDSF) has created a partisan U.S. political battle over who lost Afghanistan.

It is nearly certain that this partisan battle will continue to be part of a bitter debate in the U.S. mid-term election in November 2022. 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 this “blame game” will continue to center on which president lost Afghanistan, and one where the debate will involve Democrats placing the blame for the collapse and its aftermath on President Trump and Republicans finding equally partisan reasons to blame President Biden.

When it comes to assigning responsibility, each party is likely to continue focusing on the individual decisions of the other side’s President, and largely ignore the failings of the U.S. Congress. This “blame game” now centers on which President “lost” Afghanistan during the Trump and Biden presidencies and can be held responsible for the sudden collapse of the Afghan government and forces as well as the chaotic evacuation that followed.

In practice, both parties have cause to blame the President in the other party, particularly if they ignore the history of the war before the February 2020 peace agreement; the broad ranges of policy failures within the U.S. State Department, USAID, Department of Defense, and intelligence community that are highlighted in the analysis in this report; and the failure of Congress to adequately challenge the Executive Branch.

On a purely partisan basis, the Democratic Party argument can claim that that the Trump administration mismanaged the initial peace agreement it signed on February 22, 2020. It can claim that the February 2020 peace agreement traded withdrawal for negotiations, but that it never defined a possible peace and never created an effective peace process, and that – in doing so – it effectively “lost” Afghanistan by defining the following conditions for what amounted to complete U.S. withdrawal:

The record makes a strong case for such an arguments:¹

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.

Seen for a narrow partisan perspective, these words allow the Democrats to claim the February 2020 agreement negotiated by the Trump administration led to major U.S. withdrawals and Afghan political turmoil before the Biden administration took office, making the “loss” of Afghanistan inevitable.

On the other hand, the case for the Republican Party's partisan arguments seem equally valid. The Republicans can argue that the major U.S. troop withdrawals that took place under the Biden administration as well as their speed and scale led to the collapse of the Afghan government and forces that followed. Republicans have focused on statements like President speech on April 14, 2021 that the U.S. would withdraw from Afghanistan in September 2021:²

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.

And, Republicans have focused on President Biden's other announcement 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," as well as his announcement on July 8, 2021 that:³

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.

Focusing on the Lessons and Taking Equal Responsibility

Seen from a more balanced perspective, these partisan arguments ignore the all too bipartisan failures over two decades that led both President Trump and President Biden to decide on a withdrawal. They are framed in ways that are anything but balanced and objective and that fail to make any attempt to examine the overall successes and failures over twenty years of war that led to Afghanistan's collapse.

They ignore the steady deterioration of the Afghan government's position from at least 2014 onwards, previous reductions in U.S. civil and military aid, the divisions and corruption in the Afghan government and forces, the Taliban's growing success as an insurgent movement from

2017 onwards, the resistance of Congress as well as the executive branch to easing the constraints on allowing Afghans who support the U.S. to immigrate to the United States, and the failures of the intelligence community and the U.S. military in recognizing the growing Taliban success.

They ignore that fact that the February 2020 peace plan was issued without any clear indication that the U.S. had any credible plan for a peace and a post-conflict Afghanistan that the Afghan government and Taliban would agree to. They ignore that fact that neither President ever presented or supported a clearly conditional approach to peace that would have halted the withdrawal or that the meaningful peace negotiations failed to occur. They ignore the fact that the Taliban continued to fight the central government and made major political and military gains in spite of the February 2020 peace agreement, and there is no open source evidence that either President was properly warned of the risk of collapse or the need to prepare suitable contingency plans – issues that were also largely ignored by the leadership of both parties and Congress.

If one only focuses on the actual collapse – and ignores the overall history of the war – it is difficult to believe that the Trump administration did not realize that announcing a deadline for a complete U.S. withdrawal as part of a peace agreement that had no link to an actual peace plan and that would execute major step-by-step cuts in the U.S. role and presence in Afghanistan – like reducing the official total of U.S. troops from 4,500 to 2,500 – would be more than a prelude to full withdrawal. The Trump administration should have realized that its actions would most probably lead to a full U.S. withdrawal without peace and could lead to the collapse of the Afghan central government and Afghan forces.

At the same time, these same policies and force cuts continued under the Biden administration. They became coupled to far more serious reductions in basing facilities, contractors, intelligence personnel, and elite forces. They still took place without any real progress towards peace, with only marginal cooperation from a hopelessly divided Afghan government whose term of office had expired, and in spite of the growing levels of violence and problems in the Afghan forces described in this report.

The speed and scale of the actual collapse that followed was not predictable, but the Trump administration should certainly have seen it as a possibility during its planning for the February 2020 peace agreement. Similarly, a Biden administration that inherited the fully classified intelligence assessments of the Taliban's progress – as well as the data on the Afghan government's weaknesses and the Taliban's gains described later in this analysis – should have realized that its withdrawal announcement could catalyze the sudden collapse of much of the central government's defense efforts.

Moreover, both the Trump and Biden administrations seem to have used the possibility of substantive peace negotiations as a political cover for U.S. withdrawal. Both did so without advancing a credible peace plan and continued to withdraw U.S. forces although no real peace negotiations took place. No one could have firmly predicted the scale of the sudden collapse that actually took place, but both administrations should clearly have seen that a “worst case” contingency was all too possible. In short, one can argue the wisdom of their choices to withdraw but scarcely on a partisan basis.

As for the outcome of the current “blame game,” President Biden may suffer most from the fact that he is the President actually in office during a crisis like the collapse and will inevitably have to take much of the responsibility. Moreover, unpredictable “worst cases” inevitably force the

President in office to make “worst case responses,” and they are often chaotic messes that no serving President can avoid.

Fortunately, it seems unlikely that any such debate on “who lost the war” will repeat the same long, meaningless U.S. debate that followed World War II over “who lost China.” The current partisan waste of time seems unlikely to go on much longer than the mid-term election in November 2022. It is more likely to become the kind of the low-level debate following the Vietnam war over “who lost Vietnam” that went on until Henry Kissinger suddenly found that “red” China was a convenient strategic partner in dealing with Russia. Like Vietnam, it will be easier to forget, move on to other issues and potential successes, and quietly write off the war.

Learning to Meet Continuing Threats

Fortunately, it seems unlikely that the current “who lost the war” debate will repeat the long, meaningless U.S. debate that followed World War II over who “lost” China. The current partisan waste of time seems unlikely to go on much longer than the mid-term election in November 2022. It is more likely to quickly become the kind of low-level debate that went on until Henry Kissinger suddenly found that “red” China was a convenient strategic partner in dealing with Russia. Like Vietnam, it will be easier to forget, move on to other issues and potential successes, and quietly write the war off.

The fact that narrow partisanship is likely to eventually implode is scarcely, however, a reason to avoid learning as much as possible from the actual lessons of the Afghan conflict. There are far too many other countries where terrorism, insurgency, and civil conflict pose a possible threat. Increased competition with China, Russia, and Iran has already exposed all too many possible cases where the U.S. must be ready in attempting to bring stability to local conflicts. If the U.S. fails to learn from its mistakes in Afghanistan, its competitors and enemies may be all too capable of exploiting its weaknesses and failures.

In short, there needs to be a truly serious effort to examine the history of the Afghan war and the lessons that the U.S. and its allies should learn. This effort should examine the full range of civil lessons, the military lessons, and the lessons that emerged from the entire history of the war – and should not simply focus on its end.

Such an effort should address the fact that the losses in the war were driven as much by failures in nation building, by the U.S. treatment of Afghanistan’s civil sector, and by the ANDSF’s failures in combat. Such a lessons effort 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. It should examine the waste from the surge in military and civil spending before 2014, and the ways in which the cost of the war then dropped sharply through FY2021. It should also examine why the war lasted so long – and the lack of effective strategic triage that took two decades to cause the full U.S. withdrawal from the fighting.

Assessing the Lessons that Need to Be Examined

The Burke Chair has revised, updated, and expanded its past commentaries on these issues to present a detailed analysis that an official lessons of war study must address, including the key

data that highlight the need for such an analysis. It draws on a wide range of quantitative data, maps and graphs, and quotes to highlight the importance of given areas of study.

It draws preliminary lessons in an attempt to highlight these issues and illustrate the need to properly address the full range of lessons that have emerged over all 20 years of 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 range of broader issues that highlight the need to look at the consequences of any form of victory or conflict resolution and to engage in a far more careful process of “strategic triage” in engaging in the use of military force as well as in civil and military nation building efforts. It shows that if one examines the full costs 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 kind of resources to the conflict that it did or that it had the grand strategic priority to justify two decades of conflict.

It suggests that the key issues are not why the war was lost, the failures in the peace process after February 2020, or the reasons for the sudden collapse of Afghan forces in the summer of 2021. They are whether letting it escalate and prolonging it was worth its cost. The examination of the civil and military challenges that extended the conflict and cumulatively led to a major U.S. defeat is the central focus of this analysis for the lessons the U.S. needs to fully analyze. It is 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.

Institutionalizing the Right Effort to Learn

Official efforts to learn such lessons are only part of the story. Many of the best studies for the lessons of previous wars have come from outside governments. In fact, at least two outside experts issued important books on the war just before or shortly after the collapse: Carter Malkasian’s *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* and Craig Whitlock’s *The Afghanistan Papers*. There are certain to be many more.

At the same time, outside studies are no substitute for an effective effort within the U.S. government and for one that is properly funded, staffed, and given full access to classified as well as open source material. The U.S. needs to conduct a proper analysis of the challenges the U.S. faced over time, its successes and failures, and the lessons for the future needs to have full access to classified and sensitive data as well as full access to every element of the government involved in the war. It needs to be properly staffed and funded, cannot be rushed to judgment, and will take several years to complete.

The U.S. must not repeat its past mistakes in seeking to learn from the Afghan War. Fortunately, this time it also already maintains a structure within the government that has the expertise, objectivity, and practical contacts it needs to do the job efficiently, handle sensitive and classified

data securely, and take a “whole of government” approach that will ensure that there is a proper focus on both the civil and military lessons of the conflict.

Here, the U.S. has an option it did not have in past wars. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) has already addressed many of the lessons that should be learned from the war. It has experienced experts that have already worked in the field. It has shown that it can handle sensitive and classified data and has shown it can work well with military and civilian personnel in the field, with both parties in Congress, and with outside experts. Equally important, SIGAR has demonstrated that it really is non-partisan in a Washington where partisanship is all too common and where campaigning for the 2022 mid-term election has already begun.

Furthermore, SIGAR has focused on the full range of the details of U.S. actions over the course of the war and on issues concerning the costs of war in terms of money and casualties – and not on policy and strategy in the broad sense. It has shown that it can properly examine the detailed problems in train and assist efforts for the Afghan military, the problems in civil aid efforts, and the impact of Afghan internal politics and corruption. It has already worked with classified data on the growth of Taliban forces down to the local level and on the full impact of the shifts and cuts in U.S. and foreign military, civilian, and contractor personnel.

Most importantly, SIGAR has consistently shown that it has no institutional biases or reluctance to discuss difficult decisions and bureaucratic failures. It is an organization which – unlike so many study groups and commissions – has proven its ability to be objective and deal with the uncertainty of so many aspects of complex warfighting decision-making.

To succeed, however, SIGAR’s mandate will need to be extended almost immediately, along with its authority to collect key data, keep experienced personnel, and have full access on an interagency level. Congress needs to act quickly to change SIGAR’s mandate, give it at least two more years to work through the lesson process, and avoid pressing it for instant answers in the many areas where data need to be verified and conflicting views need to be addressed.

Congress also needs to understand that the cost of learning the right lessons from this war will be negligible compared to the cost of failing to learn. Important as direct competition with China and Russia may be, the U.S. will face many more struggles against terrorism, irregular warfare, and insurgencies. It will still have to deal with a world where at least 20% of the countries are now fragile states, and where the U.S. must find the right path to a real “whole of government” approach and adequate contingency planning.

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Learning from Why the War Was Not Won

Trying to find some person or group to blame for losing a twenty-year-long war is, at best, an exercise in intellectual and political hypocrisy. The key issues that need to be examined have nothing to do with “who lost the war.” They need to focus on why the war ended with so many sudden Taliban gains, what lessons need to be drawn from each major phase of the war, and how the U.S. can act more effectively in the future. A valid analysis must 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.

Such an effort must 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.

Blundering into the Wrong Kind of “Nation Building”

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

As will be discussed shortly, there were many aspects of the military security assistance effort that helped to lead to failure. In retrospect, however, at least half the reasons for the collapse of the Afghan government and forces in mid-2021 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 such failures in aid efforts and in shaping the failures in Afghan civil governance. These failures did as much to lose the war as the flaws in outside military support and the erratic and ill-formed efforts in building effective Afghan forces did.

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

The need to learn from the failures in Afghan nation building is clear. Some form of nation building will be an inevitable part of virtually any successful U.S. effort to help another country deal with terrorists, extremists, insurgents, or civil conflict; with state terrorism, extremism, and authoritarian abuses; or with the collapse of an economy, political stability, or effective governance. Most such states have largely created the threat they face through their own failures. As the Afghan war demonstrates all too clearly, winning tactical victories and building up military forces will not solve the underlying problems that created and have driven the resulting conflict, and focusing exclusively on the fighting may actually increase popular support for the other side. Treating the symptoms does not cure the disease.

The problem is not whether the U.S. will need to help and sometimes pressure strategic partners and host countries’ partners into nation building. The need for some form of nation building is virtually a given. It is rather what kind of nation building it should attempt; how it can best help a partner rather than trying to transform it; and how it can best integrate its civil and military efforts, mix civil and military aid, and ensure that its efforts are managed honestly and effectively.

And here, President Biden needed to be far more straightforward in the explanation he gave for America’s withdrawal from Afghanistan on July 8, 2021:⁴

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.

Nation Building from the Start

In practice, the U.S. was deeply involved in nation building from the start. U.S. nation building efforts 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 (AIA) that governed the country from December 22, 2001 to July 13, 2002. As early as January 2002, the State Department had drafted a ten-year plan for Afghanistan.⁵

President Bush announced a Marshall Plan for Afghanistan in his 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.

The U.S. then played a major indirect role in every Afghan election that followed; in shaping the aid to the Afghan budget meant to shape its formation as a state; in advising on what might be described politely as its "failed" constitution in 2004; in pressuring 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.

Military Forces Treat the Symptom, Not the Disease

There is little to be gained from debating whether or not 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 very 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.

However, the moment the Taliban was largely driven from the field in late 2001, the U.S. was confronted with the need to either leave Afghanistan to the Northern Alliance or whatever Afghan power structure emerged from the Taliban's defeat, or to support some form of nation building. While the U.S. focused on terrorism and warfighting, President Bush still had to face some aspects of the reality that the U.S. faces. These include at least three threats or "enemies" when the U.S. intervenes in such conflicts – and usually four threats when hostile outside powers are added to these numbers :

- The first threat is the mix of hostile force the U.S. is providing military and civil support and forces to help defeat.
- The second threat is the government and military forces of the host country's government or the factions the U.S. is attempting to support. It is the failures, corruption, and divisions in the government or group the U.S. is supporting: failures that usually contributed in the creation of the hostile force the U.S. is seeking to defeat and that limit or cripple the ability of the U.S. to succeed or win.
- The third threat is the U.S. itself: Its ignorance of the country in its attempts to aid its people and of the full range of factors that divided the country and led to internal conflict. Here again, failing to adapt U.S. train and assist efforts to the special civil and military needs of fragile or failed states, particularly ones with a radically different culture and level of development, can be as much of a threat as the forces the U.S. is attempting to fight and defeat.
- The fourth threat is outside powers. Their willingness to provide sanctuary, arms, train and assist efforts, and volunteers or covert forces can sharply raise the cost of U.S. efforts and tip the balance towards defeat.

The U.S. might have done better by avoiding any effort to rapidly transform Afghan politics, governance, security forces, and its economy. At the same time, there were only weak and uncertain options for creating a more traditional and “Afghan” leadership and governance. The Northern Alliance was fragile and divided. There was no broad 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 alternatives to nation-wide security forces; no alternative to the governance or justice systems; and no alternative to the civil structure that could create a stable pattern of civil government services, infrastructure, and economic development.

The U.S. also had to deal with 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.

These realities – and to some extent the seeming ease of the initial effort to “defeat” the Taliban and push it out of power – led the U.S. to choose an aggressive form of “nation building” in its attempt to remake Afghanistan. It did so, however, with little recent experience and through a series of efforts that lacked overall coordination, serious overall planning, and continuity of effort. Real progress was made in some individual areas, but not on a national basis – and largely in the form of sporadic efforts whose problems led to serious failures over time and to failures that eventually did much to trigger the full U.S. withdrawal.

As **Figure Two** shows all too clearly, the resulting U.S. efforts led to massive erratic swings in funding. Efforts to create integrated aid and economic development programs as well as the efforts to integrate the civil and military projects failed. U.S. aid not only became transformational, its cost and size rose to unprecedented levels through 2011. It then was allowed to virtually collapse by 2014, but it then regressed to the level where it did little more than support the budget of a corrupt and ineffective Afghan central government without any real conditionality over the flow of money by 2018.

Failing to Create Effective Civil Efforts

In fairness, most of these failures may have been inevitable. Hindsight can often identify the problem, but it often fails to provide a convincing solution. The inherent challenges in transformational nation building efforts are simply too great. Even most peaceful outside efforts at nation building efforts since the end of World War II have produced 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 other governments 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.

Basic differences in levels of development and political culture 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. Good intentions, however, were no substitute for the lack of U.S., allied, and Afghan capacity to create practical systems that could actually implement rapid changes and reforms. A lack of effective planning and control over the sudden massive increases in aid funding and an equal failure in managing the slashing cuts in aid – tied in practice to an inflated government salary with low salary levels and poor fiscal controls – without any real conditionality in tying the flow of money to honesty and performance made corruption virtually a way of life.

While there were different cycles of failure over time, a detailed and objective analysis of Afghan civil development over the last twenty years is almost certain to reveal the following major problems:

- A lack of competent and experienced political leadership as well as the existing factional differences by region, ethnicity, 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, without direct election of representatives from given Districts, and with a President that maintains 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 the adequate planning and effectiveness measures to tolerate massive levels of corruption.
- Rushing civil and military efforts where far too few Afghans had the education, training, and experience to implement them but had far too many opportunities to profit from their positions. Many efforts did have the initial and continued support of many educated, urban Afghans and exiles. Many Afghans attempted to achieve more democratic forms of government, more effective rules of law, and efforts to develop a more modern economy. In broad terms, however, the size and pace of civil and military aid programs greatly exceeded Afghan capabilities.
- 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 interests of given regions, factions, and Districts.
- Creating a long series of ambitious economic, governance, and legal system reform plans that were not effectively implemented and substituted pledges of reform for performance.
- Wasting major resources on efforts in developing mining and pipelines as well as the “Ring Road” and the “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-narcotics 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 with 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.

The U.S. can learn much from studying its responsibility for such failures, but many were largely beyond U.S. control. They were driven by Afghanistan's divisive political culture and its 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.

Some early failures that helped shape the course of the war were driven by the lack of Afghan, U.S, and other outside competence to draft an effective constitution in 2004 as well as the failures to set practical goals for aiding such a different society. Three key examples are that they (i) gave the President far too much control over money and key appointments, (ii) did not reflect the need for an effective legislature that represented local power blocs, and (iii) failed to create effective structures for the local and provincial governments. 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 that a less involved and minimal effort that accepted a far more "Afghan" form of government would have succeeded. The years of civil war that broke out after the fall of Najibullah in April 1992 led to the birth of the Taliban and gave it control over most of the country by 2001. The warlords and power brokers that survived the Taliban's fall were largely the same kind of figures that had helped to create the group and then later contributed in crippling the success of the Afghan government from 2002 onwards.

The U.S. and its allies had to do something. The irony is that by trying to do far too much – and in a form that sought to create far too much of a mirror image of Western democracy – they accomplished far too little. One key aspect of a lessons study will be to determine whether a more moderate and slower paced civil aid effort might have resulted in far more success.

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

It is important to note that the United States did not begin its nation building efforts by focusing on building up the Afghan military or security forces. 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 the U.S. 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 and plans for such 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 FY2002.

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 the total amount of Afghanistan reconstruction funding was allocated as follows by March 2021:

- \$88.32 billion for security (including \$4.60 billion for counternarcotic initiatives)
- \$36.03 billion for governance and development (including \$4.37 billion for counternarcotic 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.

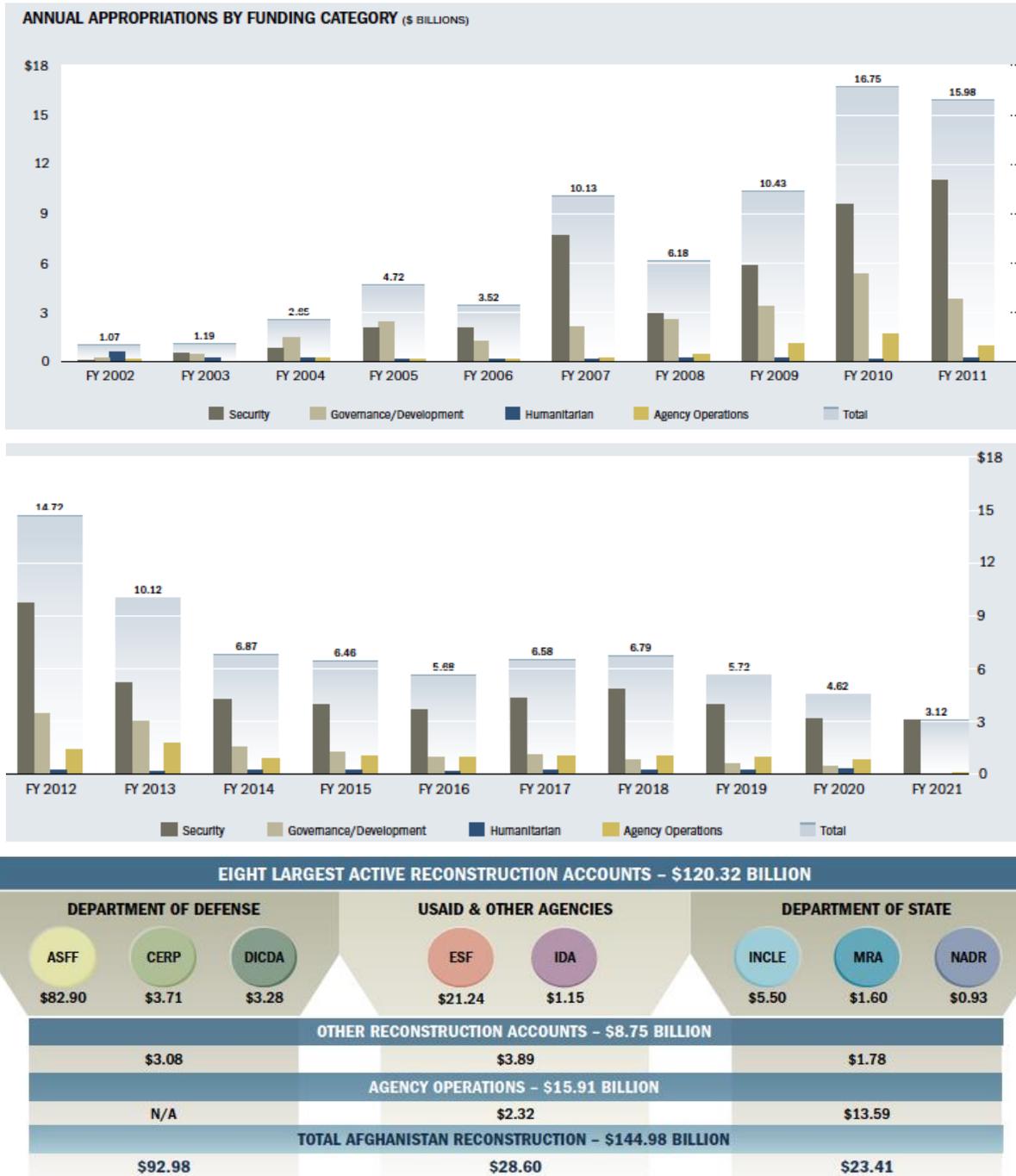
SIGAR’s more detailed Quarterly Reports to Congress, and other official open sources, show radical increases in spending through 2012 – partly driven by the resurgence of the Taliban – but then reflect an erratic implosion of different spending cuts after that date. This level of turbulence makes it clear at the grossest possible level that there was no consistent plan or level of effort in any major category of aid within the different major civil and military efforts – something that will become far more clear when the full range of U.S. and other documents, supposedly reflecting 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 tying 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 counternarcotic 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 narco-state 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

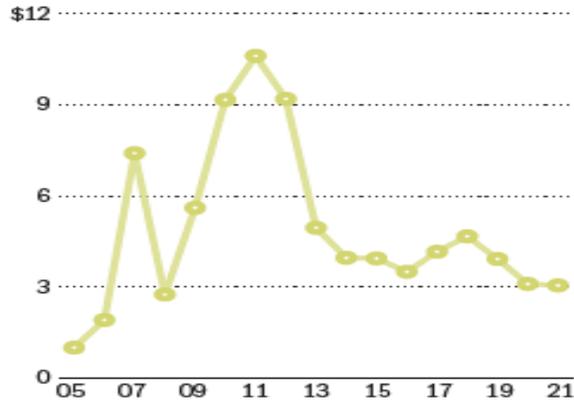


ASFF: Afghanistan Security Forces Fund, CERP: Commanders’ Emergency Response Program, DICDA: Drug Interdiction and Counter-Drug Activities. ESF: Economic Support Fund, IDA: International Disaster Assistance
 INCLE: International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement, MRA: Migration and Refugee Assistance, NADR: Non-Proliferation, Antiterrorism, Demining, and Related Programs.

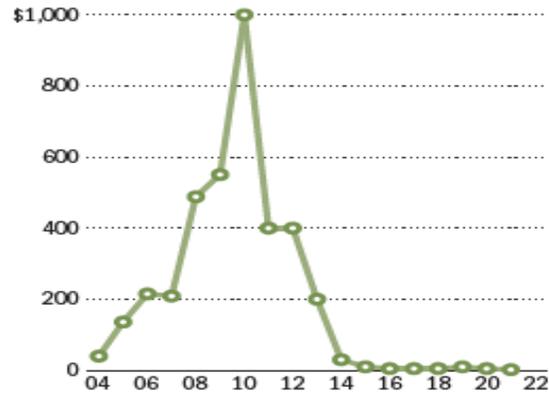
Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 25-27; and SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghan Reconstruction*, August 2021, pp. 4-5, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>.

Figure Two: SIGAR Estimate of U.S. Reconstruction Aid and Cost of the Afghan War from FY2002 to FY2022 in Current \$U.S. Billions

ASFF APPROPRIATED FUNDS BY FISCAL YEAR (\$ BILLIONS)



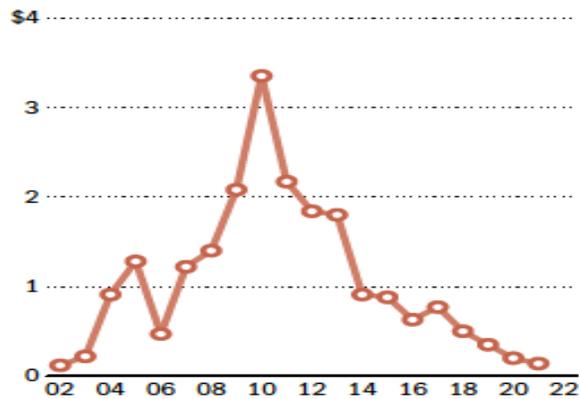
CERP APPROPRIATIONS BY FISCAL YEAR (\$ MILLIONS)



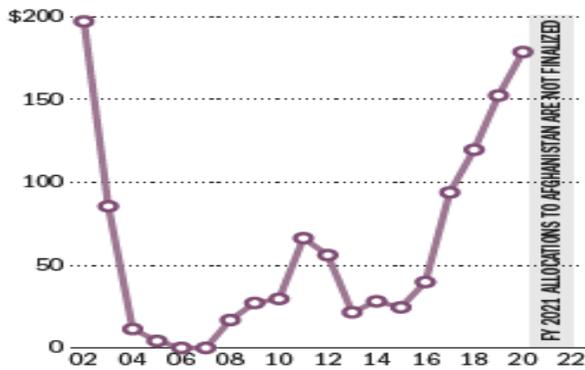
DICDA APPROPRIATIONS BY FISCAL YEAR (\$ MILLIONS)



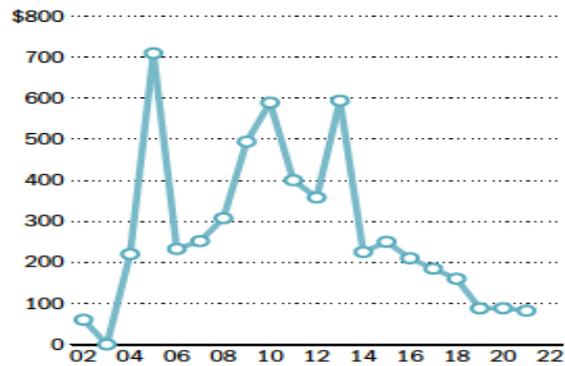
ESF APPROPRIATIONS BY FISCAL YEAR (\$ BILLIONS)



IDA APPROPRIATIONS BY FISCAL YEAR (\$ MILLIONS)



INCLE APPROPRIATIONS BY FISCAL YEAR (\$ MILLIONS)



Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 30-38.

The “Hole in Government”; Strategic Jingoism; and the Lack of Planning, Effectiveness Measures, and Conditionality

A full analysis of the lessons of the Afghan War is also likely to show that many failures were driven by the different ways in which the U.S. approached both civil and military aid, thereby creating a “hole in government” approach that became a critical reason why the war was lost over a twenty-year period – although there are problems that cannot be blamed on any given U.S. administration or political party.

The U.S. never developed coherent integrated plans for civil and military development or tools to manage and implement such an effort. The actual allocation and implementation of all forms of aid usually varied sharply by year, and there was no administrative structure plan that could tie together all the elements of aid – especially civil aid.

SIGAR reporting notes that,⁶

The challenges U.S. officials faced in creating long-term, sustainable improvements raise questions about the ability of U.S. government agencies to devise, implement, and evaluate reconstruction strategies. The division of responsibilities among agencies did not always take into account each agency’s strengths and weaknesses. For example, the Department of State is supposed to lead reconstruction efforts, but it lacked the expertise and resources to take the lead and own the strategy in Afghanistan. In contrast, DOD has the necessary resources and expertise to manage strategies, but not for large-scale reconstruction missions with significant economic and governance components.

This meant no single agency had the necessary mindset, expertise, and resources to develop and manage the strategy to rebuild Afghanistan. For the U.S. government to successfully rebuild a country, especially one still experiencing violent conflict, civilian agencies will need the necessary resources and flexibility to lead in practice, not just on paper.

This poor division of labor resulted in weak strategy. While initially tied to the destruction of al-Qaeda, the strategy grew considerably to include the defeat of the Taliban, an insurgent group deeply entrenched in Afghan communities, then expanded again to include corrupt Afghan officials who undermined U.S. efforts at every turn. Meanwhile, deteriorating security compelled the mission to grow even further in scope. U.S. officials believed the solution to insecurity was pouring ever more resources into Afghan institutions—but the absence of progress after the surge of civilian and military assistance between 2009 and 2011 made it clear that the fundamental problems were unlikely to be addressed by changing resource levels. The U.S. government was simply not equipped to undertake something this ambitious in such an uncompromising environment, no matter the budget. After a decade of escalation, the United States began a gradual, decade long drawdown that steadily revealed how dependent and vulnerable the Afghan government remains.

An adequate effort to assess the reasons for the failures in the U.S. effort will require a detailed and objective analysis of these problems, and one with full access to both open source and classified data. Many of those that participated, however, have made it privately clear that the U.S. exercises in creating coordinated civil-military plans were hollow shells.

Some of the civil-military plans did set broad goals for civil-military and described good intentions, but they were never 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 – and the civil plans were not coordinated with the military plans, and they were often so broad and lacking in detail as to be little more than statements of good intentions.

SIGAR describes several key problems in this process:⁷

The responsibilities for developing different components of the reconstruction strategy were divided in problematic ways. The National Security Council (NSC) is in charge of developing national security policy,

but the process is not designed for overseeing large-scale reconstruction efforts... As former national security advisor Stephen Hadley told SIGAR, “There was just no process to do post-war mission planning.”

As a result, the NSC’s primary contribution to reconstruction strategy was in the evaluation of the “ends,” as these are closest to high-level policy. Below that, according to the former NSC “war czar” Douglas Lute, the “chain tends to get weaker.” The ends receive far more scrutiny than the ways and means, which are mostly left to the agencies to determine—particularly the Departments of State and Defense and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Each of these agencies then devises their own sub-strategies for specific time periods, geographies, or thematic areas (like counternarcotics or anti-corruption) in order to implement the specific ways and means of the larger strategy. This delegation is somewhat intuitive, as these agencies know best what resources they can bring to bear, and how. Yet these skills are not evenly distributed, which creates problems for developing and executing the ways and means.

Of the three, State was usually charged with articulating the ways and means—in other words, leading the interagency reconstruction effort in Afghanistan. Yet at no point during the 20-year campaign did any of SIGAR’s interviewees believe that State had the ability to lead the effort in any meaningful way. Former senior NSC, State, and DOD officials variously said State was “not capable of leading,” “biased against structured planning,” lacks “a strong analytic or planning culture,” and was weak at “defining the end state and then all the steps to get to the end state.” For example, according to one senior U.S. official, “We asked [State’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard] Holbrooke how he’d implement [the 2009 strategy], and he gave us 20 papers, one of which was solely about pomegranates. They weren’t planners... We forced them to plan, but it was crap, a paper push.”

The deficiency is not new. The Clinton and Bush administrations both issued presidential directives to improve interagency planning and staffing related to stabilization and reconstruction. State established a Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (CRS) in 2004, but the Congress did not fund it for several years; in the meantime, it lacked the resources to meaningfully contribute to strategy and planning for the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Like any organization with significant authority but minimal resources, CRS was marginalized by other offices across the interagency that viewed it as a bureaucratic threat... The office’s failures only reinforced the impression that State could not plan. So in 2011, CRS became a conflict-focused bureau at State with no mandate for leading interagency planning...

With State unable to craft a vision for the ways and means of the mission, the only organization left to fill the void was DOD, which has extensive practice. According to Douglas Lute, “The only professional group that does real strategy is the military.” So with Afghanistan, he told SIGAR, there was a heavy burden on the military for strategy development “and an underappreciation of policy, diplomacy, and development. These are all considered secondary to the primacy of military ways.”

Much of the problem comes back to resources. State’s budget and staff pale in comparison to DOD’s. In 2021, Congress appropriated \$696 billion for DOD, compared to \$56 billion for State. State has a total of only 24,000 American employees, a number that is fewer than the number of U.S. troops stationed in South Korea alone and which is dwarfed by the 1.4 million troops in the U.S. military globally. State’s 7,900 foreign service officers—the backbone of the agency—only slightly outnumber the musicians employed in DOD bands...

SIGAR also reports that these problems were made far worse by a failed and over-ambitious strategy,⁸

The challenges U.S. officials faced in creating long-term, sustainable improvements raise questions about the ability of U.S. government agencies to devise, implement, and evaluate reconstruction strategies. The division of responsibilities among agencies did not always take into account each agency’s strengths and weaknesses.

For example, the Department of State is supposed to lead reconstruction efforts, but it lacked the expertise and resources to take the lead and own the strategy in Afghanistan. In contrast, DOD has the necessary resources and expertise to manage strategies, but not for large-scale reconstruction missions with significant economic and governance components. This meant no single agency had the necessary mindset, expertise, and resources to develop and manage the strategy to rebuild Afghanistan. For the U.S. government to

successfully rebuild a country, especially one still experiencing violent conflict, civilian agencies will need the necessary resources and flexibility to lead in practice, not just on paper.

This poor division of labor resulted in weak strategy. While initially tied to the destruction of al-Qaeda, the strategy grew considerably to include the defeat of the Taliban, an insurgent group deeply entrenched in Afghan communities, then expanded again to include corrupt Afghan officials who undermined U.S. efforts at every turn. Meanwhile, deteriorating security compelled the mission to grow even further in scope. U.S. officials believed the solution to insecurity was pouring ever more resources into Afghan institutions—but the absence of progress after the surge of civilian and military assistance between 2009 and 2011 made it clear that the fundamental problems were unlikely to be addressed by changing resource levels. The U.S. government was simply not equipped to undertake something this ambitious in such an uncompromising environment, no matter the budget. After a decade of escalation, the United States began a gradual, decade long drawdown that steadily revealed how dependent and vulnerable the Afghan government remains.

There was no effective mechanism for regularly reviewing and updating many plans, and there was no continuing staff to give them continuity and ensure they would have real impact. They were never tied to effective tools for properly planning and administering most aid efforts, plans, and projects. They lacked proper fiscal controls and efforts to control waste and corruption, sometimes even lacking adequate supervision to ensure project and program completion – and they were more often lacking a form of effective measurement of their success over time.

The actual aid efforts in the field that drove projects and programs were also driven by U.S. staffs that largely operated on the basis of one-year assignments, and who were often judged more by their ability to spend money and claim success than to spend it wisely and actually achieve given objectives. There was no real “whole of government” approach. There was only 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 was pressure to spend that was never matched by adequate pressure to manage money, make its allocation conditional on honest spending, and actually measure effectiveness.

Worse, these civil and military efforts repeated one of the key U.S. mistakes in Vietnam. Every year became the equivalent of the first year of the war. There was no real continuity. Personnel transitions often occurred without effective overlaps and transition planning. While some officials did serve extended tours, many took extensive leave during their one year in the country, and the problems involved grew steadily after 2007 as Taliban gains made it harder and harder to operate in the field and work with Afghans outside Kabul.

The U.S. also has much to learn from a detailed and objective study of what the spending in **Figure Two** actually bought. As has already been noted, work by SIGAR and the LIGs has made it all too clear that that many – if not most – projects were poorly planned, poorly executed, and never provided the promised benefits – if they were actually completed. In a substantial number of cases, money was spent on projects that were either never completed or sometimes more than “paper” efforts.

The U.S. often failed to take an effective lead in shaping and coordinating international aid efforts where such a lead was needed. Civil aid planning and management – like the U.S. approach 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 address the efforts of other countries. U.S. efforts did not properly 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.

Additional problems were caused by the lack of coordination between allied countries. Far too few civil aid efforts were properly coordinated on a multinational basis. The United Nations Assistance Mission in 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.

In practice, however, UNAMA largely failed to coordinate any major aspect of civil or military aid, and no common standards were enforced to ensure the effective use of money, proper contracting supervision, completion of effective efforts, continued implementation over time, and limitations on corruption. While the military side of such civil-military plans were more detailed, each country deploying forces and military advisors established its own procedures and rules of engagement – many sharply limiting their military value and creating a further lack of coordination of civil and military aid efforts in the field.

Key Failures in the Overall Civil Aid Effort

If one looks at a more complete list of the problems in the civil effort, a detailed study of the lessons of war is likely to reveal that the U.S. should also learn from the following failures:

- The U.S., allied countries, and UNAMA did not demonstrate an effective capability to plan credible aid efforts to reform Afghan governance and the Afghan economy. They did produce a wide range of goals while donor conferences sometimes reviewed the shell of plans, but the real-world aid efforts were largely programs and projects that had some individual value but could not address the broader problems of bringing stability and progress at the District level, particularly in the rural areas most threatened by the Taliban.
- In the case of the U.S. – and several key allied countries – these problems were compounded by aid structures focused on humanitarian and project aid, with no real capability to realistically analyze and plan development on a nation-by-nation basis – particularly in a country as backward and unique as Afghanistan. The World Bank field teams were a partial exception – particularly in terms of diagnostics, but even the World Bank headquarters – as well as USAID, the IMF, and UN – focused on classic efforts to create GDP growth through nationwide programs that were decoupled in critical ways from the economic realities in Afghanistan, that avoided any real effort to deal with the corruption and internal divisions in the government, and that ignored the Afghan President’s misuse of his control over spending and appointments.

The creation of more modern urban enclaves – and some aspects of aid and training – created an educated urban class that depended largely on outside aid but was not paid enough to meet its expected living standards. This helped to increase a pattern of corruption that had become endemic among senior officials and power brokers.

- Many aid personnel deliberately avoided dealing with the local and other security issues where aid could have been a critical tool in dealing with insurgency.
- Far too many of the efforts at nation-building relied on studies and individual plans based on extremely weak analyses and optimistic assumptions. The “new silk road” was a practical joke from a real-world panning viewpoint. So were a number of ambitious pipeline, rail, and mining programs. Optimism is no substitute for reality.
- Far too many civil efforts claimed far more success than they really had, disguising the need for better planning, programming, financial controls, as well as progress and effectiveness measures. As time went on, this helped to disguise the fact that less and less progress was being made – particularly in the rural areas where the Taliban operated as well as in drug areas and areas dominated by self-seeking power brokers and warlords. From roughly 2008 onwards – and far more sharply after 2014, the aid effort had steadily less impact in threatened areas.
- Aid has helped in agricultural areas, but it is far from clear how successful it has been in raising people out of poverty, dealing with that lack of processing and distribution capabilities, and competing with narcotics.

The areas where the Taliban has made the most gains have been ones where the level of aid benefits are far from clear, and climate change seems to be producing more issues because of drought.

- The International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) and other narcotics programs came to focus far too much on destroying crops and preventing the growth of such crops without succeeding in creating lasting viable options for farmers and in reforming an economic structure of power brokers and Taliban-supported efforts that relied heavily on income from narcotics. The end result is that the executive summary for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) 2020 *Afghanistan Opium Survey: Cultivation* estimates that Afghan opium-poppy cultivation in 2020 increased by 37% over the previous year and has saturated global markets to the point where total income did not increase with supply. As for interdiction, it at most covered some 8% of the opium crop, and it is unclear whether such efforts did anything other than alienate some of the growers. As a result, the counternarcotic efforts not only failed over time, it aided the Taliban in its insurgency efforts as they came to control more and more rural areas where growers and traffickers were all too glad to resume growing narcotics.
- The Economic Support Fund (ESF) program proved to be a massive waste of money. It suddenly rose to high levels and then crashed to near zero before the funding could be used to achieve sustained results.

The International Disaster Assistance (IDA) program needs a close audit to learn whether such aid actually produces lasting benefits and stable outcomes for those it aids or if it simply buys time for the underlying problems – that caused the need for such aid to grow – worse. Humanitarian aid that simply buys time is not a solution to anything. The surge and crash in aid funding also raises questions about how such aid to a government can end in actually distorting its economy to the point where its effects become negative.

The data in **Figure Two** only show part of the aid cycle. The U.S. and other donors also provided massive additional aid to the Afghan civil and military budgets, and much of this aid was spent in a limited number of urban areas – and in ways that both led to massive corruption and that created urban enclaves of comparative wealth and security that became steadily more isolated from the realities in the rest of Afghanistan. The end result interacted with the problems in the military aid effort cited earlier. A few key urban areas increasingly became the center of government efforts in ways that isolated both the Afghan central government and many power brokers from the rural areas where the Taliban was gaining without creating a stable basis for transition to any form of self-sufficiency.

Peace Negotiations, Aid Dependence and Prospects for Post Conflict Stability

The level of Afghan dependence on outside aid created by these problems, the resulting failures, and the resulting alienation of the Afghan people eventually became key causes of the collapse of the Afghan government. At the same time, they raise critical questions about the failure to plan for a future where Afghanistan could ever stand on its own even if the Afghan government won and about the lack of any clear plan to provide more effective aid in the effort to negotiate a peace.

While the peace negotiations never got to the point of tangible discussions of financing and the allocation of resources, these issues raised critical questions as to what kind of peace could ever be achieved that was not equally or more dependent on outside aid, as well as to how the Taliban or whatever other successor government that emerged could deal with the failure to sustain such aid. The negotiations demonstrate the fact that “conflict termination” alone is no substitute for some form of stable political settlement, structure of governance, and economy once the fighting is over.

The SIGAR report to Congress for July 30, 2021 shows just how serious the resulting failures were in the period before the collapse began:⁹

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. That proportion climbs to almost 80% of Afghanistan's \$11 billion in total public expenditures when off-budget (U.S.-managed) assistance is counted along with on-budget (Afghan managed) aid.

Afghanistan consistently has insufficient domestic revenues to cover government expenditures, offsetting deficits with international grants. Figure (Three) demonstrates this trend in recent years, with sustainable domestic revenues covering on average only 43% of Afghan government expenditures. This problem has only worsened as domestic revenues have stagnated while government expenditures have steadily increased. Donor grants totaling \$8.5 billion per year (covering both security and civilian assistance) finance more than half the Afghan government budget and approximately 75–80% of total public expenditures (including funds not channeled through government ministries).

The pandemic has aggravated the Afghan government's inability to generate sufficient domestic revenue and its heavy dependence on international assistance—long-standing challenges stemming from extreme poverty, limited capacity, persistent corruption, tax evasion, and the strength of the untaxed informal and illicit economies. Amid increasing expenditures and declining revenues during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Asian Development Bank reported that the fiscal deficit, excluding grants, increased from the equivalent of 13.9% of GDP in 2019 to 20.8% in 2020.

In Afghanistan, approximately 90% of the economy is informal and, therefore, largely escapes taxation, hindering the government's financial Afghanistan consistently has insufficient domestic revenues to cover government expenditures, offsetting deficits with international grants. Figure (Three) demonstrates this trend in recent years, with sustainable domestic revenues covering on average only 43% of Afghan government expenditures. This problem has only worsened as domestic revenues have stagnated while government expenditures have steadily increased. Donor grants totaling \$8.5 billion per year (covering both security and civilian assistance) finance more than half the Afghan government budget and approximately 75–80% of total public expenditures (including funds not channeled through government ministries).

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...Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Afghanistan's licit economic growth was too low to reduce the increasing poverty rates and improve living standards for most Afghans. Additionally, licit export levels stagnated in 2019, despite the Afghan government's providing a majority of the transit costs for exports through subsidized air corridors to incentivize regional trade. The pandemic intensified these economic challenges, adding to existing uncertainties about Afghan peace talks, deteriorating security conditions, and the level of future donor support.

SIGAR also notes that,¹⁰

Members of parliament and cabinet ministers also assert that significant levels of government revenue are lost to corruption... The strength of the informal economy limits the Afghan government's ability to benefit from the extractives sector, which Afghan officials have highlighted as potentially a significant source of revenues. A large percentage of mining activity in Afghanistan is conducted by informal or illegal small-scale operations in both government-controlled and insurgent controlled territory, with their products smuggled out of the country.

In March 2021, the Afghanistan Precious Stones Association claimed that around \$1 billion in precious stones is smuggled out of Afghanistan each year. In contrast, illegal mining has increasingly become a key source of revenue for the Taliban. In areas under its control, the Taliban issues mining licenses, collects taxes and protection money from mining operations, and controls the smuggling of quarried minerals and gems abroad, in particular to Pakistan. In late January 2021, Minister of Mines and Petroleum Mohammad Haroon Chakhansuri stated, "The Taliban are currently mining in 750 areas. This group is using the money [made from] mining against the government." As a result, the formalized extractives sector has failed to materialize

as a driver of economic growth and a source of sustainable domestic revenues for the Afghan government. For revenue derived from trade, such as customs, more than half of the total value of goods that crosses the international border flows to the informal economy. This is a substantial source of income for anti-state insurgents, other non-government groups, and corrupt officials, resulting in hundreds of millions of dollars in lost revenue for the Afghan government

One key tool was rarely used in practice. As is discussed later in more detail, the U.S., other donors, and UNAMA made no real effort to make military or civil aid conditional and to ensure that money only flowed when the Afghan government used it effectively, used the aid where it was supposed to be spent, 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. This compounded the problems in ensuring that aid was used effectively and with minimal corruption.

The Civil Threat from the Afghan Central Government

The civil lessons of the war go far beyond aid and nation building, and here again, the key lessons lie in examining the full record and the details. It is tempting to focus on the military dimensions of war, but this all too often means that analysts do not place proper emphasis on the civil causes of victory or defeat and the extent to which the civil government is the equivalent of a self-inflicted wound.

Failures in Afghan governance at every level were a critical part of war fighting and a critical aspect of counterinsurgency campaigns where the U.S. consistently tended to underestimate the strengths of the Taliban and the impact of the weaknesses in Afghan governance and the ANSDF. 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.” Such movements succeed because of the failures in the politics, governance, and economics of the opposing government as well as from their relative ability to exploit the divisions driven by ideology, religion, ethnicity, sect, and tribe.

At Least Three Enemies, Not One: Civil Failures Became a Critical Part of Warfighting

It is a grim reality in far too many U.S. counterinsurgency campaigns the U.S. military has been 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 the problems in dealing with 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.

As has already been discussed, there were many causes of the Taliban’s recovery and its gradual defeat of the Afghan central government in much of the Afghan countryside. However, the key cause may well be the fact that the government in Kabul was in many ways its own worst enemy at both the civil and military levels – driven by its corruption, lack of focus on the needs of the Afghan people, factionalism, and power brokering.

The claimed levels of civil progress in Afghanistan were always better than the reality in the field, and the level of governance did not improve with time. 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 Afghan District in March 2010, as the rise in Taliban activity and problems in popular support for the District governments began to increase in ways that could no longer be ignored. The **data Figure Three** presents are not fully sourced or explained, but it shows the last detailed open source map of the trends by District. It reflects a decline in performance, 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

Overall Assessment of Key Districts

Figure 5 - Overall Assessment of Key Districts, March 18, 2010

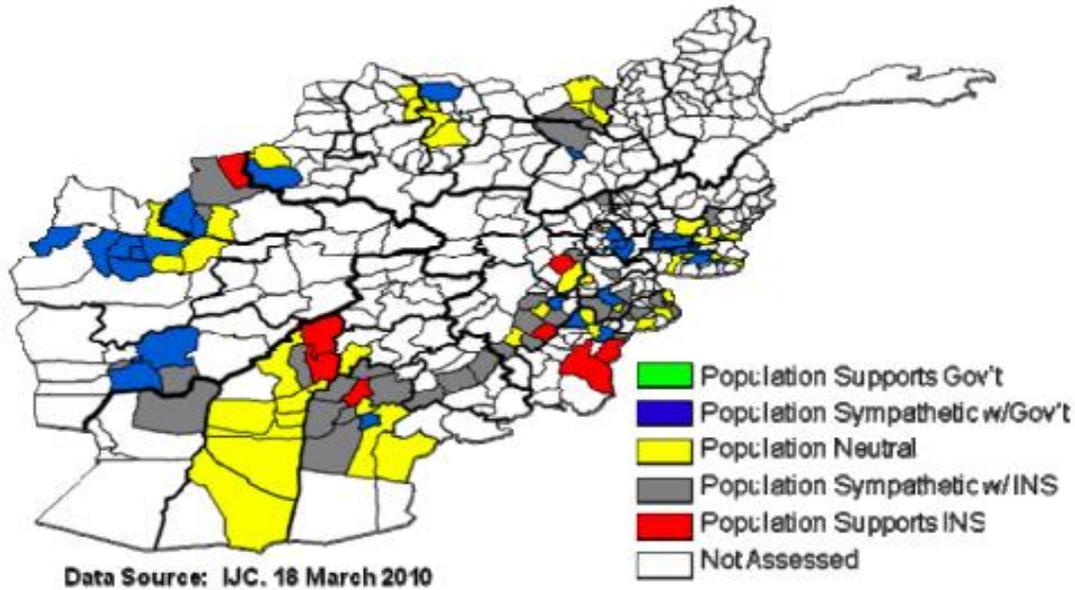
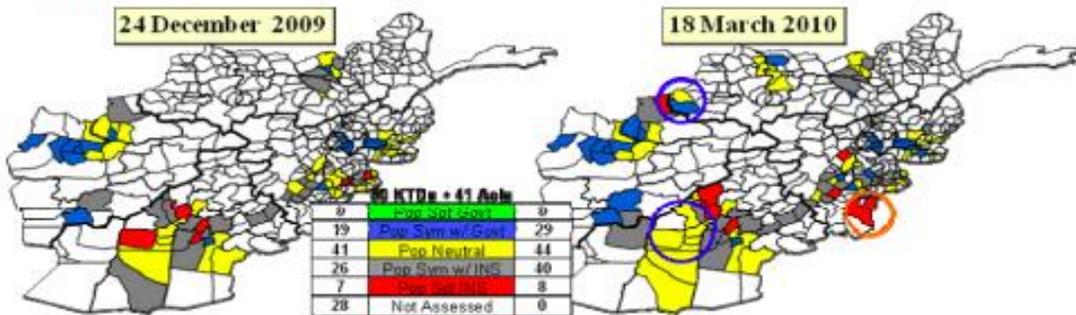


Figure 6 - Comparison of Overall Assessment of Key Districts, December 24, 2009 - March 18, 2010



(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))

Source: Department of Defense, Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan, April 2010, p. 36, https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/Report_Final_SecDef_04_26_10.pdf.

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

No one involved should have ignored these issues simply because of a lack of prior experience in Afghanistan. The world has long been filled with other “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 it has been a state that made remarkably limited overall progress at a remarkably high cost. This lack of progress 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 in 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 was geography and the comparative isolation of much of its rural population to District capitals. Another was ethnicity. 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 recognized 14 ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Baloch, Turkmen, Nuristani, Pamiri, Arab, Gujar, Brahui, Qizilbash, Aimaq, and Pashai, ” and these differences interact with ethnic and regional differences.

Religious difference are also issues. While the CIA estimates that Afghanistan is 99.7% Muslim, it also 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.

Here again, excerpts from SIGAR reporting help to put the scale of the problems in the Afghan government in perspective, and they illustrate the need to learn how to handle these differences in other countries and conflicts from the lessons of the Afghan war:¹¹

Early on the United States seems to have misunderstood the dynamics of political power in Afghanistan, particularly the role of patronage networks, which were born of several decades of armed conflict and had become entrenched in the country’s political economy. As the United States would discover, the fact that Afghanistan lacked formalized governance institutions in the western tradition did not mean that there was ample space for the outside introduction and cultivation of those institutions.

Efforts to build Western-style governance institutions and populate them with the heads of preexisting patronage networks simply empowered malign actors, who did not “self-correct” as some officials may have hoped they would. Consequently, a number of key local allies of the United States—some of whom had themselves been deposed by the Taliban to widespread applause—often actively countered U.S. efforts to foster good governance and economic growth.⁴⁰¹

As SIGAR highlighted in a report on corruption in Afghanistan, by legitimizing warlords with political and financial support, the United States helped empower a class of strongmen at the local and national levels who had conflicted allegiances between their own power networks and the Afghan state. Indirectly, the United States helped to lay a foundation for continued impunity of malign actors, weak rule of law, and the growth of corruption.

Although U.S. agencies recognized the dangers of aligning with warlords, they did not fully appreciate the risks this posed to the mission in Afghanistan. Indeed, the corruption that the U.S. and coalition allies encountered in Afghanistan seems to have been viewed the same way as it would be in the United States—as the deviant criminal behavior of individual Afghan officials, rather than a systemic phenomenon.

The U.S. government's misreading of the Afghan social and political environment meant that initiatives designed to stabilize and rehabilitate the country were poorly adapted to the local context. Programs to improve the economy were particularly vulnerable to the machinations and predation of Afghan powerbrokers. SIGAR's report on private sector development in Afghanistan, for example, found that "the technical and financial assistance provided to Afghan institutions and firms relied mainly on Western technocratic models that often failed to adequately consider how powerful Afghan social groups and institutions influenced public policy and the functioning of markets." The rush to privatize assets and industries without mitigating the undue influence of established patronage networks made elite capture of assets almost inevitable. The U.S. government's failure to understand and mitigate that capture meant that privatization of state owned enterprises not only failed to reap the intended economic benefits, but also fostered corruption and limited business-friendly government reforms.

Just as the U.S. government struggled to recognize the activities of rapacious Afghan elites, so too did U.S. officials fail to understand how and why lower echelons of Afghan society resisted certain economic reforms. Many rank and file civil servants, for example, had grown accustomed to controlling the formal economy and did not welcome the advent of a Western-style market economy that relegated the state to merely supporting economic affairs. Many of these Afghan officials effectively obstructed or derailed initiatives meant to improve the country's business climate.

... Between 2003 and 2015, the U.S. government spent more than \$1 billion on rule of law programming in Afghanistan, with approximately 90 percent of that funding going toward the development of a formal legal system. That system, however, was foreign to most Afghans, who favored informal, community-level traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, where an estimated 80 to 90 percent of civil disputes have always been handled. Such informal justice systems operate by rules familiar to most Afghans, and the system is far more efficient. In the formal court system, cases can languish for months—despite hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars spent on legal reform efforts.

While the U.S. and the Afghan governments focused on extending governance through the provision of services—including the formal justice system—the Taliban competed for popular support by providing a semblance of security and justice via their own version of traditional dispute resolution. While the outcomes of the Taliban-run processes may not have always delivered what the United States would consider to be just and equitable outcomes, the path to those outcomes was much quicker and more familiar to many Afghans than the U.S.-sponsored system...By 2009, State acknowledged the importance of traditional dispute resolution, and even claimed it was a "pillar" of the coalition's effort, despite the fact that informal justice programming was receiving only a fraction of the funding devoted to the formal system.

... When the United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan in late 2001, they embarked on an ambitious effort to encourage or even impose broad reforms that touched essentially all aspects of Afghan society, including politics, economics, education, defense, rule of law, and the societal roles and relations between men and women.

The U.S. government pursued these reforms while simultaneously attempting to quell multiple security threats, including a burgeoning Taliban insurgency, a powerful narcotics industry, warlords entrenched in the Afghan government, and a nascent local affiliate of the Islamic State. Yet as this chapter demonstrates, rarely did U.S. officials have even a mediocre understanding of the environment, much less how it was responding to U.S. interventions.

In fact, blaming mistakes on a simple lack of information may be charitable. Many mistakes were borne from a willful disregard for information that may have been available. After all, in many cases, the U.S. government's very purpose was to usher in an orderly revolution that would replace existing Afghan social systems with western or "modern" systems. If the intention was to build institutions from scratch, understanding and working within the country's traditional systems was unnecessary. As one former senior USAID official told SIGAR, "We wanted to give them something they had never had before."

But instead of being a society deconstructed to its foundation by conflict and primed for the introduction of western political, economic, and judicial systems, it turned out Afghanistan was a complex society with ingrained traditions and an incorrigible political economy. These traditions were neither easy to uproot and replace, nor could they be

shoehorned into a Western institutional framework, as evidenced by the attempts to use strongmen and warlords to build a nascent bureaucracy

Population Growth, Urbanization, Social Change, and Governance

It is also critical to understand the other pressures the civil structure of Afghanistan was under and the level of internal tension. These tensions and pressures went far beyond the growing nationwide return of the Taliban and insurgency. There 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.

One key reason that affects most poor developing countries in the world was 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 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. 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 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.

The Dismal Trends in Failed Governance

Afghans seeking a more modern middle-class life often had no option other than corruption, and more powerful Afghans found that 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 pre-collapse 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 meant that the government faced extraordinary challenges after 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.

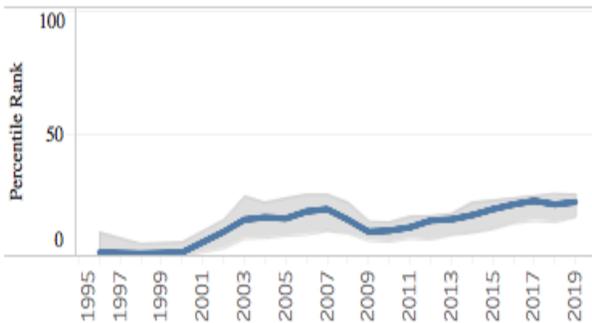
Fragile State Index: 9th worst ranked country in the world in 2021

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

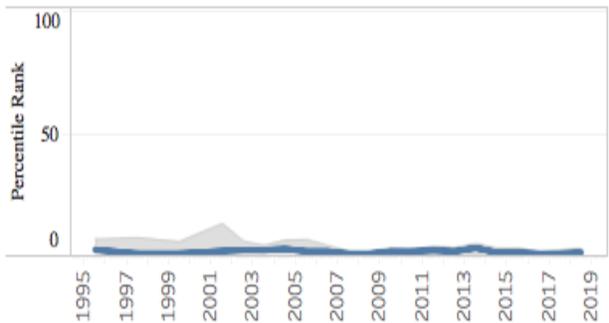
UN Human Development Ranking: Ranks only 169 out of 189 countries ranked.

World Bank Governance Indicators: 1995-2019: Towards the bottom of the worst ranked governments in the world. See below (<http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports>)

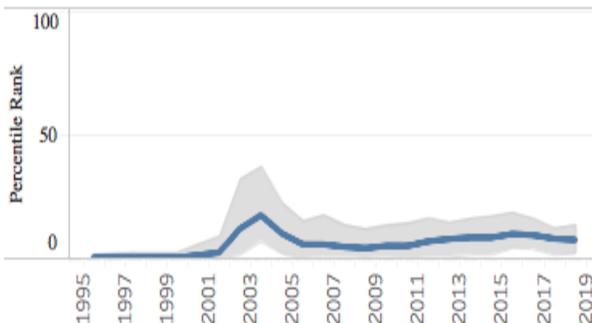
Voice and Accountability



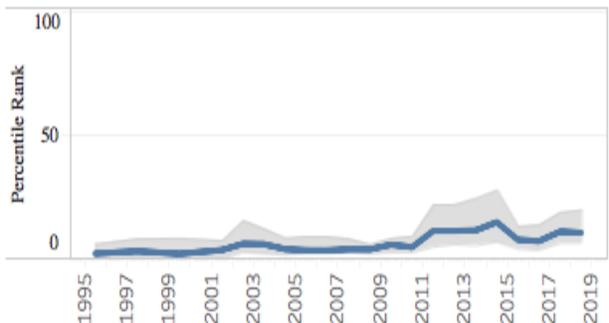
Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism



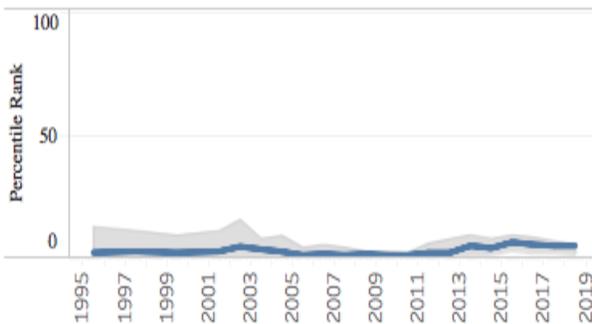
Government Effectiveness



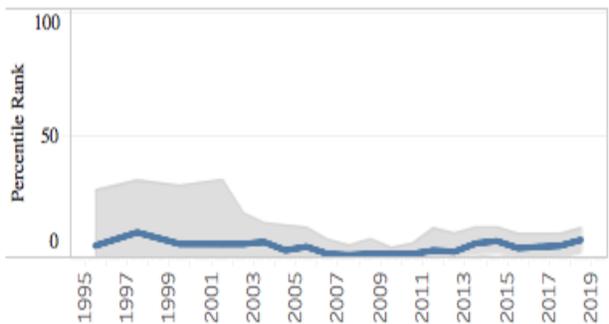
Regulatory Quality



Rule of Law



Control of Corruption



Progress Claims and Lying by Omission

Overoptimistic plans and official Afghan and U.S. claims of progress disguised these realities. Claims of rapid social progress from 2002 to roughly 2014 did reflect real progress, especially in urban areas. There is considerable truth in the pre-collapse 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 exaggerated 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.

Similarly, SIGAR may have been be over-optimistic in reporting that,¹²

There is no doubt, however, that the lives of millions of Afghans have been improved by U.S. government interventions. By 2018, life expectancy had jumped from 56 to 65, a 16 percent increase. Between 2000 and 2019, the mortality rate of children under five plummeted by more than 50 percent. Between 2001 and 2019, Afghanistan’s human development index increased 45 percent. Between 2002 and 2019, Afghanistan’s GDP per capita nearly doubled, and overall GDP nearly tripled, even accounting for inflation... Between 2005 and 2017, literacy among 15- to 24-year-olds increased by 28 percentage points among males and 19 points among females, primarily driven by increases in rural areas.

SIGAR also reported that,¹³

Despite these gains, the key question is whether they are commensurate with the U.S. investment or sustainable after a U.S. drawdown. In SIGAR’s analysis, they are neither. As one former senior DOD official told SIGAR, “When you look at how much we spent and what we got for it, it’s mind boggling”... the U.S. government had less influence over Afghan institutions than it hoped—not due to the amount of resources it gave, but due to how the U.S. government used them. The U.S. government’s goals were often operationally impractical or conceptually incoherent, meaning U.S. officials and their implementing partners often tried to:

- Root out corruption, but also to jumpstart the economy by injecting billions of dollars into it;
- Improve formal governance and eliminate a culture of impunity, but also to maintain security, even if it meant empowering corrupt or predatory actors;
- Give Afghan security forces a competitive edge against the Taliban, but also to limit them to equipment and skills that they could sustain after a U.S. departure;
- Direct considerable reconstruction funds through the Afghan government to help officials practice public financial management, but also to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse;
- Build a credible election process from scratch, but also to respect Afghan sovereignty;
- Focus on making immediate progress on security and governance, but also to build the long-term capacity of Afghan officials;
- Reduce the cultivation of poppy, but without depriving the farmers and laborers who depend on it;
- Empower women to become more educated and economically independent, but also to be culturally sensitive and respect Afghan traditions.

There may exist a middle ground on each of these spectrums that would allow for success, but U.S. officials were seldom able to find it. More often they swung from one extreme to another, as officials were unable to plan more than a year into the future and were not on the ground long enough to see even their own short-term plans through to completion. In theory, U.S. officials should have been able to anticipate, recognize, and address all of these problems when considering the mission’s strategy. However... devising, implementing, and evaluating that strategy proved exceptionally difficult.

A detailed study of the lessons of war will almost certainly reveal that many claims of progress made by the Afghan government, the U.S., its allies, international bodies like the U.N., and various NGOs from 2002 to the collapse in mid-2021 were based on estimates that were extremely

optimistic and where there were few serious data collection efforts and no reliable data. Moreover, in many cases, the quality of reporting on any such 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 as well as the growing corruption and security issues.

These 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, that 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 seemed 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.¹⁴

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)**

Source: “In numbers: Life in Afghanistan after America leaves,” *BBC*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57767067>; and “Afghanistan: What has happened to violence, poverty and women's education?,” *BBC*, July 9, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/56779160>.

From Afghanistan to “Kabulstan”

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. As a SIGAR report on corruption notes,¹⁵

By legitimizing warlords with political and financial support, the United States helped empower a class of strongmen at the local and national levels who had conflicted allegiances between their own power networks and the Afghan state. Indirectly, the United States helped to lay a foundation for continued impunity of malign actors, weak rule of law, and the growth of corruption. Although U.S. agencies recognized the dangers of aligning with warlords, they did not fully appreciate the risks this posed to the mission in Afghanistan.

Media reporting shows there were 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. SIGAR also warns that,

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 its 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. Their assessments at the end of spring 2021 – before the growing impact of Covid-19 was felt and before the collapse of the Afghan government as well as the cuts-offs in aid and trade that followed – are summarized in **Figure Six**.

Yet, these assessments only tell part of the story, and they have major structural and data problems that limit their value in assessing the links between failed economies, stability, and the outcomes of civil conflict. Moreover, Covid-19, drought, and war all present major problems in assessing Afghanistan's current status and future prospects. However, some key problems are clear. 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 had the government not collapsed and one that will likely lead to massive cuts now that the Taliban has taken over.

SIGAR estimates that Covid-19 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 the impact of Taliban gains in limiting commercial traffic along roads throughout the country.

The World Bank warned 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 reported 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.

SIGAR's July 30, 2021 quarterly report to Congress – that only covered developments through June 30 and did not cover any aspect of the collapse – noted that,¹⁶

Increased government service provision, an economy fueled by donor funds, and artificially inflated demand produced by the large international presence rapidly improved many of Afghanistan's development outcomes until the 2014 drawdown of most international troops. After the Afghan government assumed responsibility for the fight against the Taliban insurgency, licit annual GDP growth of just under 10% dropped to low-single-digit rates. Since the transition to Afghan lead responsibility for security, the afghani (AFN) has depreciated against the U.S. dollar, from approximately 57 AFN to the dollar in 2014 to around 77 by the end of 2020.

Prior to the pandemic, an estimated 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 household survey data, an increase from 34% in 2008. While the World Bank had projected that poverty levels would rise as high as 72% during 2020 due to the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic, it now estimates that overall poverty levels actually decreased to 47.1%, as the pandemic had a less severe economic impact 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.

SIGAR estimated that, "In early 2020, 55% of Afghans lived below the poverty line (defined as 2,064 Afghans 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 fifth 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.

It should be noted that some of the economists and analysts involved in making these assessments felt that their assessments understated the steady pre-collapse 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 assessments of the overall trends in the Afghan economy address popular views of corruption, views of the role played by the central government versus the Taliban, and views of income distribution.

They did 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 were tied to the pre-collapse impact of economics on the fighting or perceptions of the peace process, and none were tied to the struggle for control of given Districts and rural areas. Moreover, none seriously address either the options for a post-peace settlement economy or a possible Taliban victory. As such, they failed to provide any meaningful estimates for either continued conflict or conflict resolution. One possible lesson may well be that any such analysis must address possible futures as well as the present, address the full civil realities of war, and address the factional divisions within a nation and their economic effects.

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.

World Bank March 30, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>

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.

The question now is how a post-collapse Afghanistan will deal with the combined impact of these problems, a Taliban takeover, and Covid-19. As is touched upon earlier, these are issues that the U.S. never seemed to have properly considered in its peace agreement or in its pre-collapse planning for withdrawal.

Failing to Assess the Civil Side of Taliban Gains

Still another aspect of the civil dimension of the war merits special attention. There was remarkably little open source effort to measure the extent to which the Taliban gained public support, civil control, and influence at the District and Provincial levels. While only access to the classified record can reveal all the facts, the U.S. never seemed to have properly examined the Taliban's ability to influence and control the population of the Districts it controlled or was contesting from 2002 to the actual collapse of the Afghan government and forces.

Most of the military reporting on the war 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 as to how the population viewed the rise in Taliban presence and its military and economic activity relative to the role of the government.

Few studies 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 few credible official open source reports as to whether the central government or Taliban controlled Districts or contested them, and a series of official U.S. metrics was developed that only measured whether the Taliban won major battles that it initiated – an absurd metric in a war where the real measure of victory and the reasons for its success was dependent on the expansion of Taliban influence and control.

How Did the Taliban Make Gains in Controlling Given Districts: Some Limited Polling Indicators

The rapid Taliban gains from June 2021 onwards have since shown the importance of the increase in Taliban presence by District from at least 2007 onwards, but open source reports of total Taliban gains by numbers of contested and Taliban controlled Districts generally only reported on total government losses of an entire District and not on the mix of civil and military reasons for Taliban success. As noted earlier, few efforts were made to poll Afghans and actually examine how they perceived both the Taliban and the Afghan government as well as the failures and corruption of civil officials and the civil actions of the Afghan police.

The Asia Foundation was a partial exception. It conducted detailed annual polls that do provide assessments of popular views and expectations, although it must be stressed that these polls had to rely on methods that made it difficult to collect representative samples in order to examine all of the factors shaping Afghan popular perceptions on governance and that drove the war on a national, regional, or factional level.

At the same time, the Asia Foundation polls do provide enough insights to show that a larger and more focused polling and reporting effort on the civil attitudes by local area – might play a critical role in understanding the course of the fighting in future wars. The detailed results of the Afghan polls 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 did provide some warnings 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 was able to make a full survey. These results did show rising popular concern with security and personal safety,¹⁷

... 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.

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.

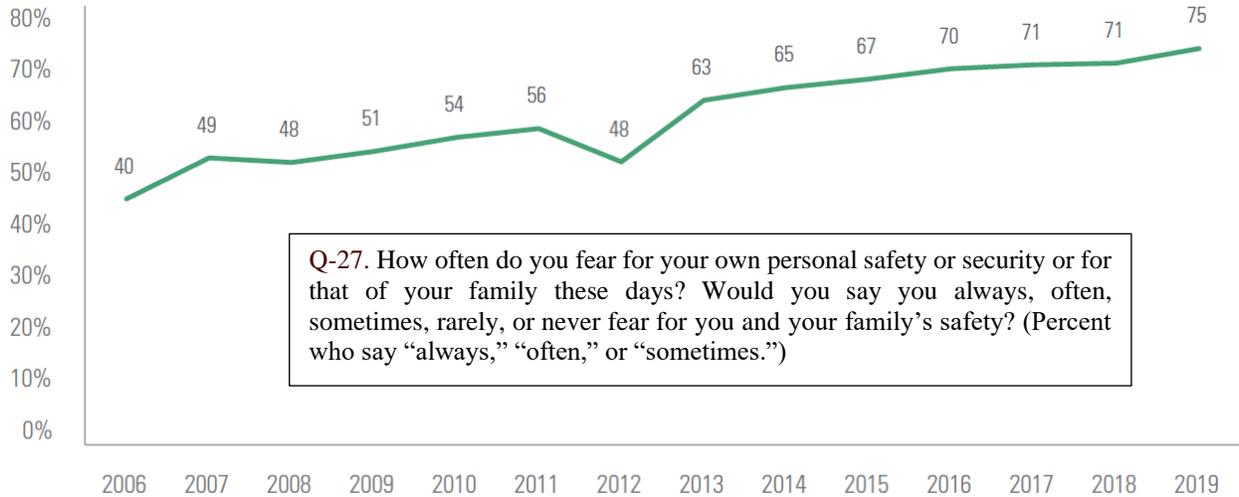
... Fear while participating in an election is also at its highest recorded level (63.3%), and this fear has increased by over 50% since the question was first asked, in 2006 (41.1%), and is representative of a longitudinal trend of rising fear and insecurity across much of the country. Respondents' 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 day²⁹. This campaign included attacks by improvised explosive device, indirect fire, and small arms fire, along with abductions, threats, and intimidation of voters."

In any case, one of the most important things a lessons study can accomplish is to fully examine the civil-military successes of the Taliban and to provide as accurate of a net assessment on the quality of the Taliban's political efforts; its role in governance and subverting the efforts of the Afghan central government and local power brokers; its tools for winning influence; its methods of raising funds; and its use of threats, extortions, and focused killings.

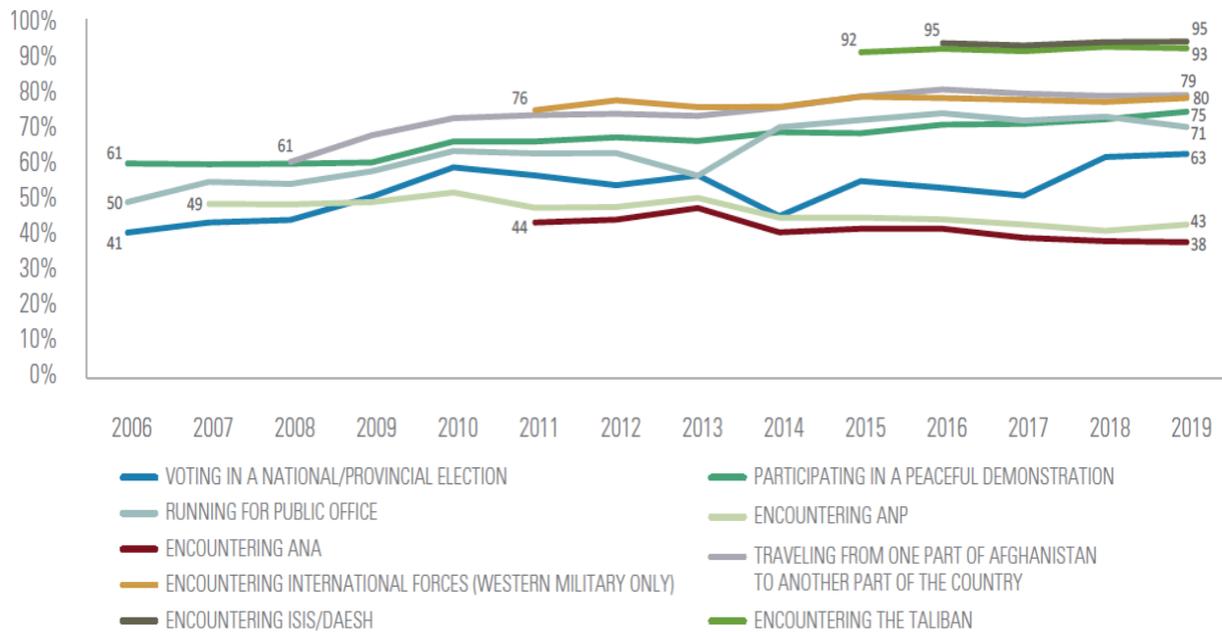
It will be equally important to study why the U.S. seems to have assumed that tactical military victories that did not permanently displace the Taliban or establish local security and effective governance and development were given so much emphasis by some elements of the U.S. command and intelligence community. In practice, Afghan and U.S. tactical victories were often accompanied by rapid withdrawals and shifts in government efforts that opened the countryside up to the Taliban rather than denying it access and control. The U.S. adopted a de facto strategy of "win" without "hold" and "build" – and civil and governance failures of the Afghan government and its shift to an increasingly urban focus only made things worse.

Figure Seven: Rise in the Level of Popular Fear in Afghanistan

FEAR FOR PERSONAL SAFETY



FEAR WHILE DOING DIFFERENT ACTIVITIES



Source: Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2019, A Survey of the Afghan People*, <https://asiafoundation.org/2019/12/03/2019-survey-of-the-afghan-people-reveals-concerns-on-peace-deal/>.

“Winning Hearts and Minds” versus Controlling the Population

Interestingly enough, the polling results in **Figure Eight** do not show that the Taliban made substantial gains in popularity over time, in spite of its gains in the number of Districts it controlled. At the same time, the 2019 survey does show 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 the Asia Foundation poll are also similar to the results of polls in other conflict countries like Iraq or of those that had major upheavals such as the “Arab Spring,” in ways that need further study. Such polls have consistently shown relatively high overall support for the government, but they have also shown that large percentages of the population feel the government has critical failures.

For example, the most recent full Asia Foundation poll of Afghanistan 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 popular hopes for the peace process (44%-54%), and for 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.¹⁸ This may reflect an urban bias in the polling samples and may be a warning that cell phone polling can produce misleading results if it cannot sample the entire population and is not designed to detect conflict related issues rather than general attitudes.

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 that 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.

This raises a broader issue when analyzing the civil aspects of the lessons of war. The histories of other insurgencies warn that there is a good reason to look beyond “hearts and minds.” “Winning hearts and minds” may be a classic cliché in counterinsurgency campaigns, but it also, is to some extent, a fantasy. “Hearts and minds” may shape voting and politics in a functioning democracy, but insurgent warfare is often anything but a battle for popular perceptions.

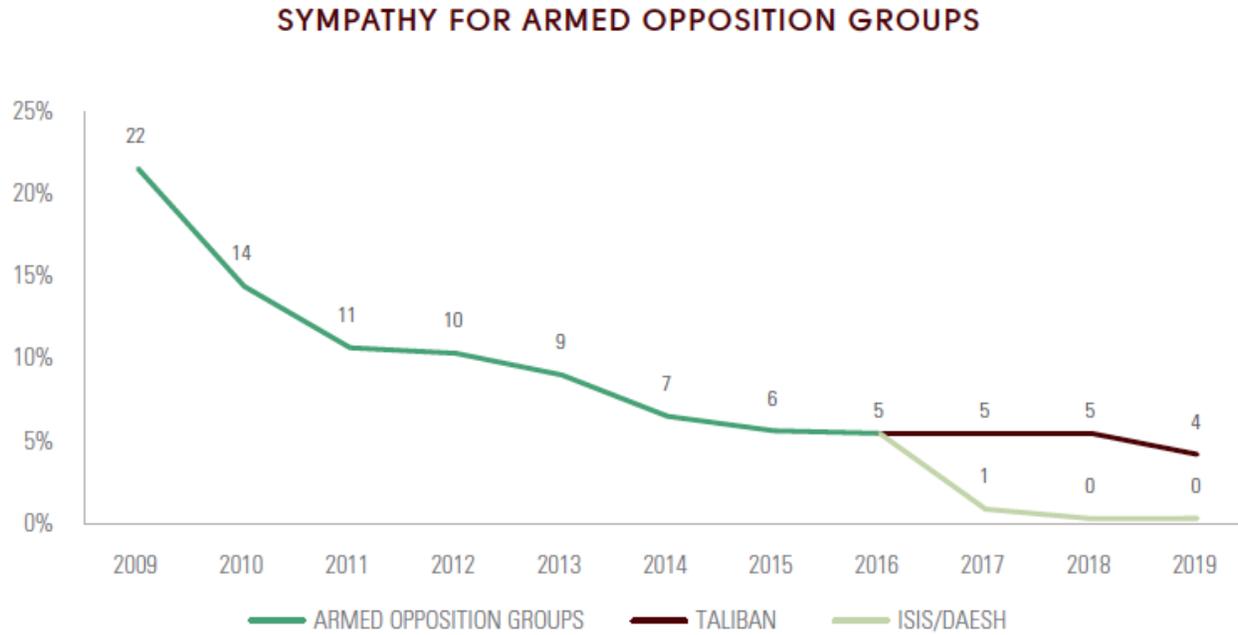
It instead is a battle for control of the population that is shaped by the use of intimidation, terror, extortion, and other uses of force – coupled to various economic and social incentives and disincentives. The ability to provide security is critical. So is the ability to directly reward fighters and supporters as well as to punish and penalize opponents, making the ability of a bullet to make hearts and minds irrelevant. 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 the 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 pursue the Taliban, and there was no civil capacity to govern that met popular needs.

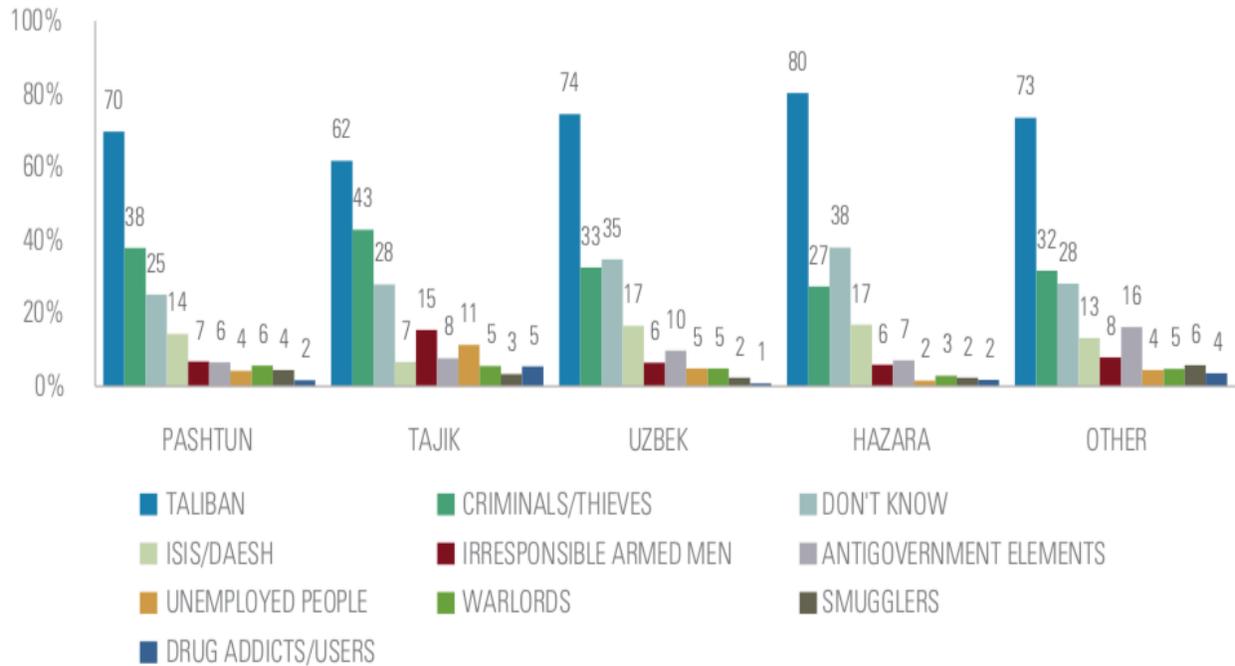
The classic exchange that Colonel Harry Summers reportedly had with a North Vietnamese officer during a break in the Paris Peace Talks in the early 1970s is well worth remembering. Colonel Summers stated, “You know you never defeated us on the battlefield.” The North Vietnamese colonel replied, “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.”

Figure Eight: Popular Sympathy for Taliban and Armed Opposition Groups



GROUPS WHO POSE A SECURITY THREAT, BY ETHNICITY

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



Source: Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2019, A Survey of the Afghan People*, <https://asiafoundation.org/2019/12/03/2019-survey-of-the-afghan-people-reveals-concerns-on-peace-deal/>

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

Important as these governance, economic, and other civil issues are, a detailed and objective study of the military aid effort seems equally certain to reveal a range of key problems that were never solved over the course of two decades and that need to be avoided in the future. Many have been addressed in SIGAR and LIG analyses and reports, as well as by outside experts. Examples include:

- As noted earlier, the U.S. faced four threats, not just one, and it never properly characterized even the first enemy – the Taliban – as an insurgent force. The second threat – the host country government was in many ways as much a civil and military threat as the Taliban. So was American ignorance of the forces driving Afghan military development and success – an ignorance that equaled to the failures in the U.S. civil effort in determining the outcome of the war. Finally, Pakistan played at least some role in offering the Taliban sanctuary, although outside powers played a much smaller role as the fourth threat than was the case in the fight against the ISIS “caliphate.”
- Corruption and ineffective leadership crippled many aspects of the aid effort, as did constant shifts in goals, structure, and the interface between different military and security services. Promotion was often political rather than merit based, and both command functions and basic functions like logistics and resupply were constantly being reorganized with limited success and without adequate reductions in corruption and waste.
- It took years to finally properly staff the training effort with qualified advisors, but training was limited and did not prepare officers and NCOs to manage complex operations or to train Afghan forces on how to operate and maintain equipment that was too sophisticated and complex for the forces that were operating it in combat. The force development effort was rushed to meet changing political goals and levels of outside support, and the provision of outside train and assist personnel in forward positions and at the combat level was erratic and varied over time. Possible solutions like the “Afghan hands” program to provide multiyear tours, sustained advice, and solid human relationships were never really implemented. Effective solutions like the Security Force Assistance Brigades came later in the war, and they were never properly implemented because of the fear of casualties and the timing of U.S. and allied force cuts.
- NATO made real efforts to integrate the training and combat missions, but key elements were divided by the caveats and limits enforced by different countries. The U.S. dominated the training and equipment of the regular army and air force, and often American air power and cadres of elite forces and intelligence personnel were substituted for effective development of Afghan capabilities to operate on their own. The military aid effort ultimately consisted of focusing on doing it the outside way, rather than finding an Afghan way that built on Afghan military experience and that could actually work.
- The central focus of U.S. and allied military assistance and the build-up of Afghan forces was the tactical defeat of the Taliban, rather than creating a mix of forces that could limit the Taliban’s growth in rural areas and capability for successful insurgent action. The focus on marginal terrorist threats, rather than the steady growth of Taliban influence and control through insurgency in rural districts opened up much of Afghanistan to Taliban success.
- These problems were compounded by focusing on a limited number of elite Afghan units that could defeat the Taliban in battle but that could not secure given areas over time. Repeated efforts to create paramilitary police, local security forces, and some real form of the rule of law had limited priority and all eventually failed, opening up wide areas of the country outside the major cities for the Taliban to power broker control and successfully control.
- The growth of the Afghan forces led to the steady growth of dependence on contractors and the ability to fight with U.S. combat support. These problems were then disguised by dishonest reporting, claiming successful independent ANDSF operations. Public relations “spin” became an active threat to honest reporting and force development.

- The Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) and Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) programs should have linked military operations in the field to both the civil aid program and to the creation of safe areas in rural districts and towns. Many U.S. and allied civilians and military did make progress in using such aid productively in areas, but such successes were limited and erratic, lacked consistent direction, and far too often led to the use of aid to support tactical operations or buy local influence and support for such operations. In many cases, it failed to understand the impact of aid in creating new sources of local tension and conflict, and once again, differences between the allied states in given areas presented problems.
- Recruitment of Afghans was driven as much by the lack of jobs in the civil economy as by patriotism. It did not end tribal, ethnic, and sectarian friction or even try to deal with it seriously. Power brokers, narcotraffickers, and war lords remained a major problem as did the often arbitrary assignments coming from Kabul.
- Over time, the growth of the Taliban in rural areas created a growing gap between these Districts and increasingly isolated larger urban areas. From roughly 2014 onwards, the war shifted to cities that had the most modern economy, active defenses, and highest security – as well as the Taliban insurgency in the field. The government's presence became steadily more fragile in such areas over time – a fact partially disguised by reporting success in battles that did not prevent growing Taliban control in rural districts and by the discontinuation of honest reporting on the level of Taliban gains and growing lack of security in such areas.

It Is at Least as Important to Learn from One's Own Failures as From an Enemy's Successes

If the U.S. is to fully understand such problems and 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 in giving the group 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 honestly assess the major mistakes the U.S. and its allies made in shaping Afghan security forces – many of which were 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, discussed in the previous section of this report, helped to 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.

The must examine the cost of the gross initial shortfalls in equipment and low numbers as well as the quality of the U.S. and allied training personnel assigned to the new Afghan forces from 2002 to at least 2011. It must examine why the land and air equipment the U.S. eventually did provide Afghan forces still was either too complex for Afghan 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.

A Series of Compromises with Necessity

Again, excerpts from SIGAR reporting warn of the need to look deeply into the reasons for the problems the ANDSF encountered in warfighting, to bring some lasting degree of security and stability to given areas, and to address the role the U.S. played in creating such problems:¹⁹

The initial U.S. military operations against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the wake of the 9/11 attacks were in partnership with independent militia forces, many of whom had previously committed abuses against their fellow Afghans... Some of these same militia commanders and their ranks were later brought into the government and security forces, where they engaged in predation and ultimately undermined the development of the Afghan National Army and Police... In fact, Afghan militias allied with the United States were sometimes direct sources of insecurity, even after the United States attempted to formalize them by inducting their members into various policing programs...

Such formalization efforts were just one of the ways coalition forces and the Afghan government attempted to find a shortcut to a more secure Afghanistan. At several points over the last two decades, rising insecurity also forced policymakers to accept problematic compromises in the development of the country's official uniformed security forces. Initially, in 2002, plans called for a transition from a large aggregate of militias who had helped topple the Taliban to a smaller, professionally trained force. Then deteriorating security and threats emanating from Pakistan led to more ambitious plans for a standing army. SIGAR found that after levels of insurgent violence skyrocketed in 2006, decisions about the size and capabilities of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces were made almost exclusively in relation to countering violence and insecurity.

As a consequence, the U.S. military's "gold standard" training program fell by the wayside... As the target strength of the Afghan National Army increased, for example, the duration of standard training decreased, from 14 weeks in 2005 to 10 weeks in 2007. That same year, senior Afghan and U.S. officials agreed to an even more ambitious plan to expand the size and capabilities of the Afghan military, transforming it from light infantry to a combined arms force, imposing additional training requirements on a process that was already making significant compromises...

In some cases, insecurity appears to have also affected retention among Afghan military personnel. Instances of Afghan military trainees going absent without leave (AWOL) in the United States increased during periods of heightened violence in Afghanistan, and personal safety concerns were reportedly the leading motivation for fleeing within the United States. In Afghanistan, retention was a major challenge for the ANDSF, with one estimate suggesting that Afghan National Army attrition stood at 2 percent per month, or roughly 24 percent per year in the mid-to-late 2000s. By 2020, Afghan security forces were still replacing a quarter of the force annually, which the U.S. military has come to view as normal. Solders going AWOL was one of the challenges driving those elevated attrition rates...

Meanwhile, the high levels of violence and insecurity that compelled policymakers to shorten training timelines to meet demand for security forces undermined their capabilities and made it that much more difficult to impose a monopoly on violence in the country... A training deficiency hamstrung the force as it tried to combat the insurgency, and insufficient training also increased the force's propensity to actually contribute to insecurity. For example, the Afghan National Police, widely known to be undertrained and deemed "predatory" in a 2015 State report, were allegedly "largely unaware of their responsibilities and defendants' rights under the law," and routinely engaged in torture and abuse. This in turn alienated local Afghans and undermined the U.S. government's overarching security goals for the country.

In many ways, Afghan forces wound up increasing the insecurity that had originally motivated policymakers to rush their training. In 2017, SIGAR concluded that the United States "designed a force that was not able to provide nationwide security, especially as that force faced a larger threat than anticipated after the drawdown of coalition military forces."

Around the start of transition of security responsibilities from international forces to Afghan forces in 2011, the United States once again began to see informal militia forces as a potential expedient bridge solution to the country's security problems, just as they had during the early days of the conflict. The militias that the United States developed—known as the Afghan Local Police (ALP)—exhibited some of the same problems as their uniformed counterparts, such as rapid growth, weak recruits, poor training, and alleged human rights

abuses. In some cases, militias that operated independently of the government were absorbed into the ALP; in others, Taliban fighters who agreed to stop fighting the government were allowed to keep their weapons and join the ALP. Such unconventional recruitment methods may explain why the ALP has been identified as a source of insecurity

The lack of attention paid to security sector governance meant that corruption ran rampant in the Afghan security forces.

As is the case with the civil sector, a lessons study 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 on 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).

Learning the Lessons of Counterinsurgency, Rather Than a War Against Terrorism

Any effort to learn the military lessons of the war must be based on a proper appraisal 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 rather than a war against terrorism. 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.

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 during the period between 2002 and 2011. 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, 2001, 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.

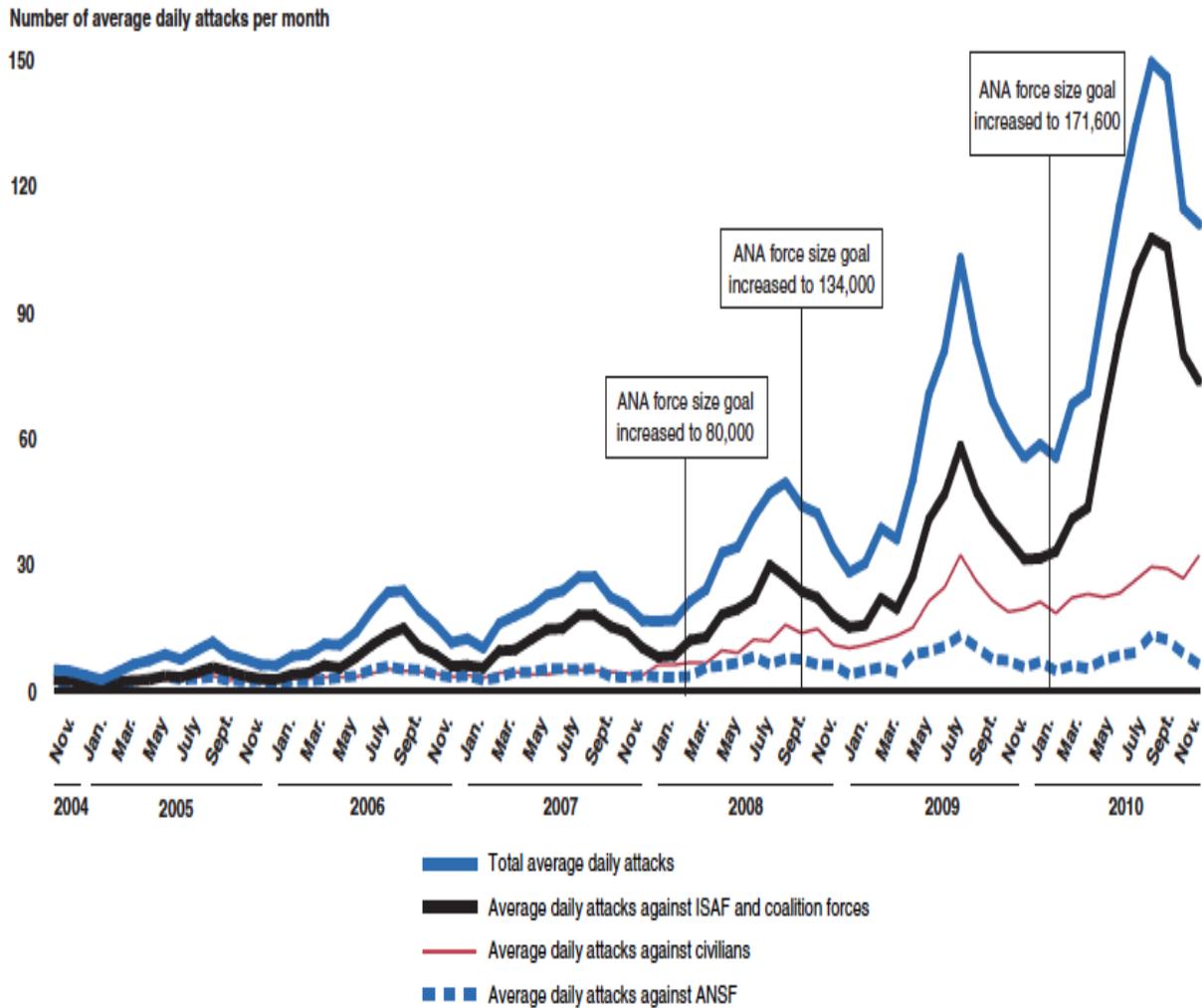
Figure Nine shows the high rate of growth in the Taliban threat and the grindingly slow rate at which Afghan forces were developed and funded between 2004-2011, the reliance on divided U.S. and allied combat forces to respond, and the sudden and erratic increases in Afghan Army force goals. It is only 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.

Other sources, which are questionable, indicate that the formation of the new Afghan Army eventually reached to the point of a seven corps forces and that it lagged far behind the need to respond to the build-up of Taliban capabilities in Pakistan and to the steadily increasing number

of Districts in Afghanistan. The Afghan Army had only about 1,750 trained combat troops in 2003; 3,000 in 2004; 21,200 in 2005; 26,900 in 2006; 50,000 in 2007; 80,000 in 2008; 90,000 in 2009; 134,000 in 2010; 164,000 in 2011; and only reached numbers approximating 200,000 in 2012-2014. Until at least 2011, many were semi-literate at best, desertion rates were high, training levels low, and equipment and supplies were limited.²⁰

It is equally clear from the slow rise in U.S. forces shown in **Figure Ten** that the U.S. and NATO were slow to react and that their initial reaction was poorly resourced and ineffective.

Figure Nine: Afghan Force Development vs. Afghan Violence: 2004-2010



Source: GAO analysis of DOD data.

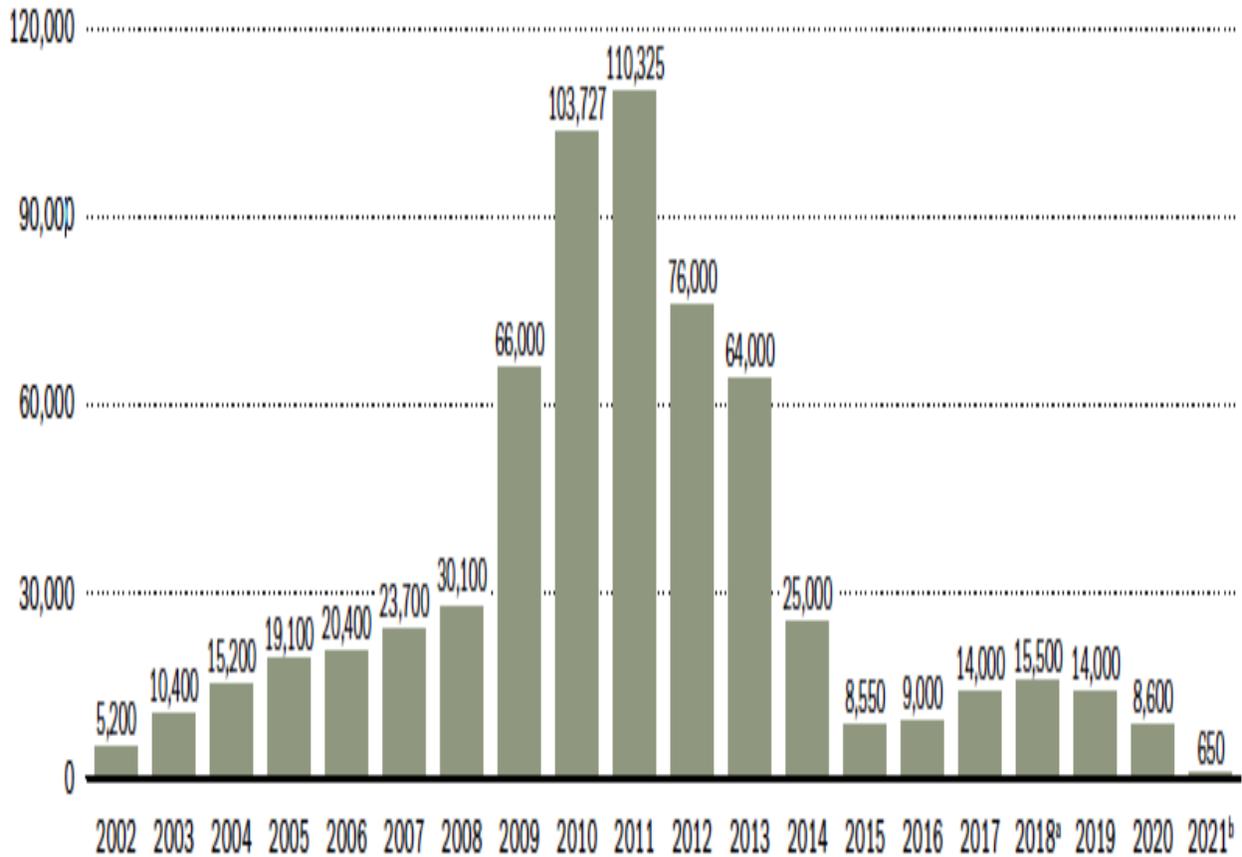
State and DoD Funding of ANA Training: 2002-2011

Dollars in millions

Agency	Fiscal years										Total ^a
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011 request	
DOD	\$2.0	\$165.0	\$283.2	\$1,317.5	\$766.1	\$4,883.1	\$1,786.2	\$4,073.6	\$5,604.1	\$7,532.9	\$26,413.6
State	\$74.7	\$191.6	\$434.4	\$413.3	\$1.0	\$1.2	\$1.7	\$1.4	\$1.5	\$1.5	\$1,122.2
Total	\$76.7	\$356.6	\$717.5	\$1,730.8	\$767.1	\$4,884.3	\$1,787.9	\$4,075.0	\$5,605.6	\$7,534.4	\$27,535.7

Adapted by the author from GAO, *Afghanistan Security: Afghan Army Growing, but Additional Trainers Needed; Long-term Costs Not Determined*, GAO 11-66, January 2011, pp. 4, 6.

Figure Ten: U.S. Troop Levels in Afghanistan 2002-2021



^a Projected for 2018 based on public statements of NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. According to USFOR-A, the publicly releasable U.S. troop level, as of March 1, 2018, remains 14,000.

^b On January 15, 2021, the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan was 2,500; 650 is projected for the end of the drawdown.

Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, 2Q 2021, p. 61.

A GAO report, issued as late as 2011 and based on U.S. command reporting, provides the data summarized in **Figure Eleven**. 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,²¹

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,²²

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 data indicate that of the first 12 new ANA units fielded since the adoption of the new capability assessment system, 11 were assessed as either dependent on coalition forces for success or ineffective.

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,²³

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

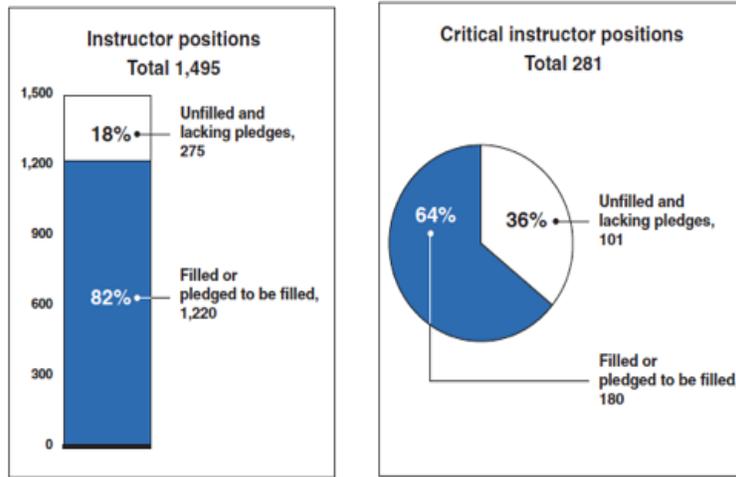
unserviceable, an additional factor is that the ANA continues to lack responsibility for its equipment. In addition, a senior NTM-A/CSTC-A official stated that the ANA's nascent logistics system gives it limited ability to maintain or repair the equipment it receives. Similarly, IJC and SIGAR30 have 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.

The U.S., ISAF, and allied efforts to develop ANDSF forces had critical shortfalls in trainers; major problems with attrition and desertion; and readiness ratings ranging from mediocre to bad through at least 2011 – and many of these problems remained through the collapse in 2021. 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 as well as 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 Eleven: 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

ANA unit	Number of NCO positions	Number of NCO positions unfilled	Percentage of NCO positions unfilled
111th Capital Division	2,016	756	38
201st Corps	5,654	1,376	24
203rd Corps	5,449	1,666	31
205th Corps	6,219	1,806	29
207th Corps	2,488	569	23
209th Corps	3,134	798	25
215th Corps	4,345	1,222	28
Special Operations Forces Division	2,570	220	9
Total	31,875	8,413	26

Massive Equipment Shortfalls

Item	Number authorized	Number on hand	Percentage of authorized on hand
Weapons			
D-30 howitzer	210	99	47
SPG-9 recoilless gun	750	254	34
Vehicles			
Variable reach rough terrain forklift	238	117	49
M916 tractor	124	56	45
M870 trailer	131	52	40
M1151 Humvee	2,108	829	39
Motorcycle	300	110	37
Fire truck	50	10	20

Item	Number authorized	Number on hand	Percentage of authorized on hand
Maintenance van	219	13	6
Fuel trailer	97	5	5
Warehouse forklift	180	4	2
Communications equipment			
Programming kit	650	308	47
Very high-frequency handheld radio	31,209	14,767	47
High-frequency base station	1,497	685	46
Very high-frequency vehicle-mounted radio	13,055	4,440	34
Tactical telephone	14,749	2,089	14
Protective equipment			
Kevlar helmet	144,638	40,803	28

Adapted by the author from GAO, *Afghanistan Security: Afghan Army Growing, but Additional Trainers Needed; Long-term Costs Not Determined*, GAO 11-66, January 2011, pp. 23-31.

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

These failures in developing effective Afghan forces between 2002 and 2009 were followed by two failed surges in U.S. troops, which helped to convince President Obama to try to terminate the U.S. role in combating the Taliban and to limit its train and assist mission. Tracing the full history of these developments will be another area where the lessons that emerged from the open source data will need to be supported by full access to classified and official data. There is, however, 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 recent 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 Twelve** shows that the surge in Afghanistan did not produce anything like the benefits of the surge in Iraq. Much of it 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.

Far too many of the U.S. surge forces were deployed into Helmand, the south, and areas where they fought several bitter battles but could not produce any lasting impact on governance or local security. Unlike Iraq – where the Sunni extremists alienated so many fellow Sunni tribesmen that they created a powerful local security force and led to support for the U.S. and Iraqi government – the U.S. surges in Afghanistan never succeeded in building up additional government and political support or in providing local security.

Moreover, the Obama administration exploited a victory against an actual terrorist that it used in order to help ease the public image of making 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, 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 formally ended their combat mission in Afghanistan on December 28, 2014, although this “end” did not conclude actual combat support, their training role, the use of U.S. elite and special forces and CIA personnel, or major combat intelligence and air support.

Here, SIGAR highlights another case where U.S. political posturing came into significant conflict with reality:²⁴

The poor results of the surge of troops from 2009 to 2012 revealed the limits of the U.S. government toolkit. In 2011, President Obama announced that all surge troops would be out by 2012 and that troops would continue coming home at a “steady pace” thereafter as “our mission [changes] from

combat to support. By 2014, this process of transition will be complete.” A year later, he announced that the defeat of al-Qaeda was within reach, and that soon the strategy’s focus would narrow to training Afghan forces and counterterrorism... The mission’s scope was thus scaling back amid claims of sufficient progress to do so. The means soon followed suit. From 2012 to 2016, there was a 63 percent drop in U.S. military assistance and a 72 percent drop in U.S. civilian assistance...

However, the drawdown laid bare just how hollow the alleged progress had been. Contested territory that had been cleared by U.S. forces was hastily “transitioned” to Afghan officials who were not ready, allowing the Taliban to seize districts as U.S. forces vacated them... By 2015, President Obama implored Americans to be patient as worsening security and governance made it clear the Afghan government was often unable to take the reins. “We understood that as we transitioned, the Taliban would try to exploit some of our movements out of particular areas, and that it would take time for Afghan security forces to strengthen,” Obama said in October 2015.

Yet more time did not help. In the three years following this speech, the Afghan government lost control of an additional 16 percent of the country, according to DOD officials, who then decided to stop tracking such data altogether... Then, when the United States began withdrawing its final forces from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, the Taliban took the opportunity to seize more than a quarter of the country in a matter of weeks, as Afghan security forces abandoned their posts or were overrun... Thus, what Ambassador Nicholas Burns observed about the war’s early years has remained true ever since: The Afghan government “cannot survive without us.”

SIGAR goes on to report that,²⁵

The United States’ determination to draw down continued to clash with realities on the ground. The Taliban remained resilient, and the insurgency became emboldened by the drawdown of U.S. and coalition military forces. In 2013, General Joseph Dunford stated, “The gains that we have made to date are not going to be sustainable without continued international commitment... We are not where we need to be yet.” Less than a year later, in March 2014, he warned the Senate Armed Services Committee that, upon coalition troops’ withdrawal, “the Afghan security forces will begin to deteriorate.” He added that “the only debate is the pace of that deterioration.”

In 2015, President Obama was forced to change timelines two more times following deliberations with the Afghan government and his national security staff. In March 2015, he announced that the United States would maintain its 9,800 troop strength through the end of 2015 and would transition to a Kabul-based embassy presence by the end of 2016... Then, in October 2015, Obama announced that the United States would halt its military withdrawal from Afghanistan, keep the current force of 9,800 troops in place through most of 2016, and keep thousands in the country through the end of his term...

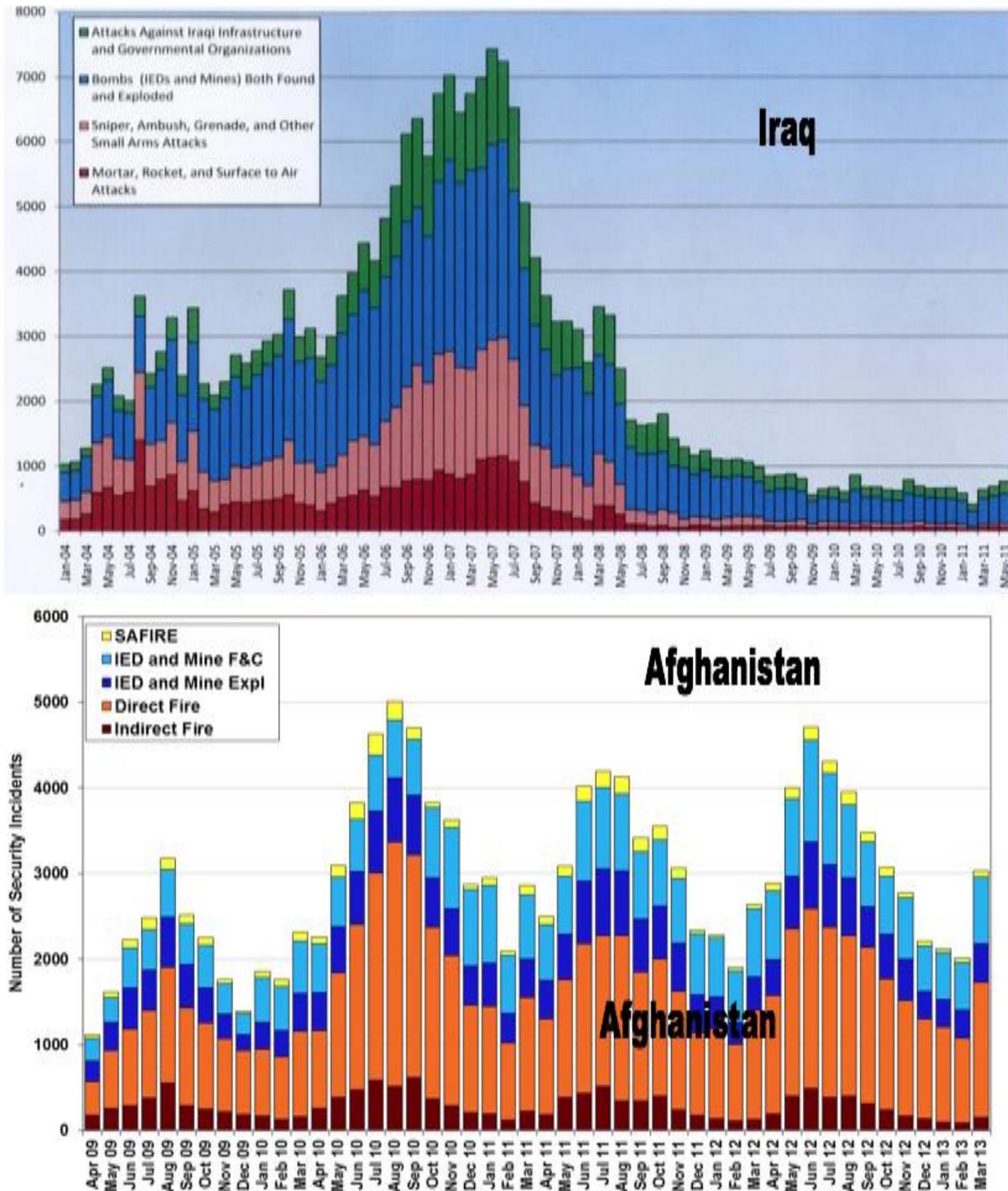
By 2017, President Trump was inclined to avoid timeline-based drawdowns. In his August 2017 Afghanistan strategy speech, he declared that “conditions on the ground— not arbitrary timetables—will guide our strategy from now on.” As a part of this new strategy the Trump administration authorized U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad to begin negotiating directly with the Taliban... In February 2020, the United States and the Taliban finalized an agreement that created a schedule for a complete U.S. withdrawal in exchange for counterterrorism assurances from the Taliban and their commitment to negotiate with the Afghan government on the future of the country...

While declining to anchor the drawdown in a calendar, the Trump administration still continued its predecessor’s tendency to draw down troops and resources with little concern for conditions on the ground. Just as the Afghan government and Taliban were about to sit down to begin exploring peace talks, the Trump administration announced it would reduce troops even faster than required, undermining any U.S. leverage that might have been used to motivate the Taliban to negotiate with the Afghan government... With their departure, the number of troops conducting oversight of U.S. security assistance decreased as well, making it harder for them to address dysfunction, lack of capacity, and corruption within the Afghan army and police.

Meanwhile, by 2021, U.S. funding for Afghan forces—the vast majority of U.S. reconstruction spending—had fallen to its lowest level since 2008... Between the Trump administration’s first budget in 2018 and its last in 2021, U.S. funding for Afghan forces fell 36 percent as troops were slowly withdrawn... In April 2021, the Biden administration announced the withdrawal of all U.S. troops, but then requested a funding

increase for Afghan security forces to \$3.33 billion for fiscal year 2022. Decreasing troop levels while increasing assistance levels is likely to strain the oversight of training and equipping Afghan security forces. Historically, this compels program managers to become preoccupied with more immediate goals, like merely keeping the Afghan government afloat...With oversight capabilities dwindling and \$6.68 billion still in the pipeline for Afghanistan reconstruction, the risk of waste, fraud, and abuse is certain to increase...

Figure Twelve: The Impact of the Surge in Afghanistan versus the Surge in Iraq



2

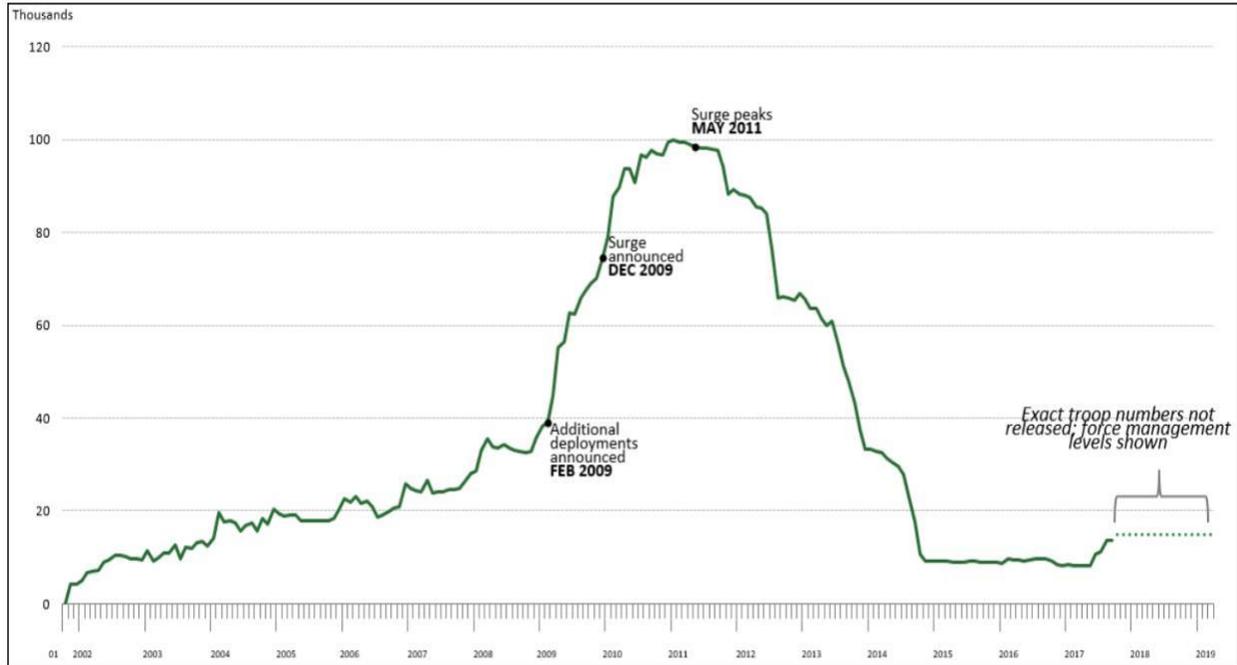
Source: Department of Defense, Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan, p. A-2.

The Failure to Create Effective and Independent Afghan Forces After 2011

Two additional figures provide a clearer picture of the cycles in the war and of the factors that helped to shape the continued inability to create effective Afghan forces from 2011 through 2020. **Figure Thirteen** shows the slow process in the effort to build-up U.S. forces as the Taliban returned to the field during 2003-2009, the impact of the U.S. surge from 2009-2011, and the sharp cuts that followed in U.S. combat troop strength. **Figure Thirteen** also shows, however, that the U.S. used large numbers of U.S., other foreign, and Afghan contractors to partly compensate for such cuts. Such data here are critical because so many reports only count U.S. combat troops officially deployed to Afghanistan.

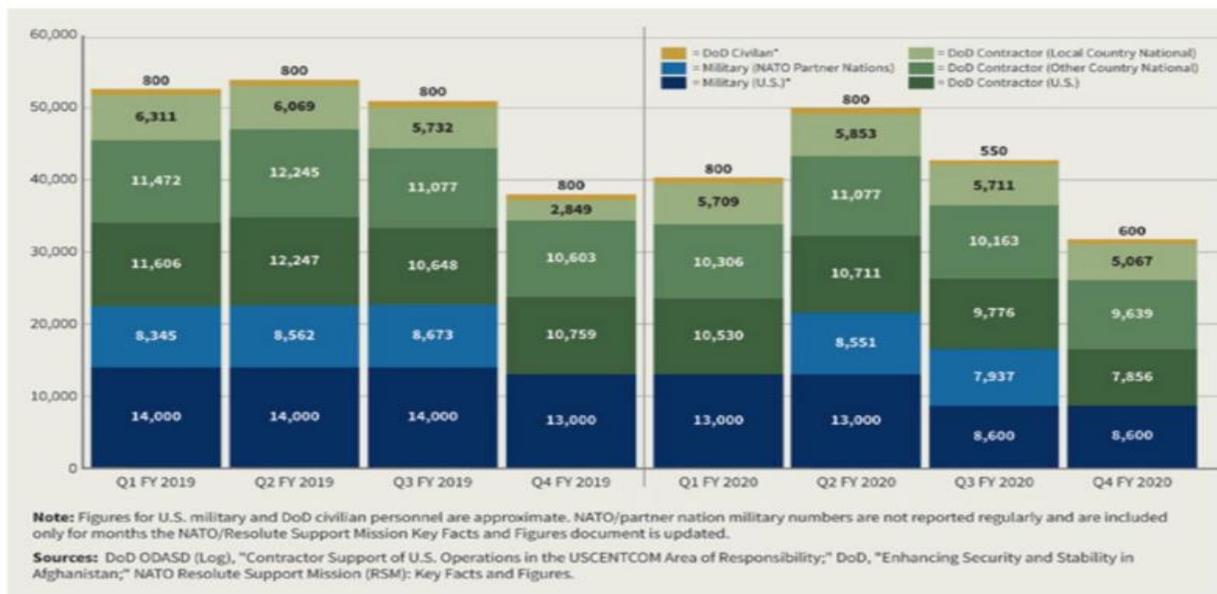
In actual practice, even the elite Afghan land forces like the Afghan Special Operations Brigades, Quick Reaction Forces, and National Army Command Corps that bore the brunt of the fighting after 2015 remained dependent on U.S. support for virtually all operations. The total U.S. mix of troops and U.S. foreign contractors was still close to 40,000 personnel 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: Drop in U.S. Military and Contractor Personnel in Afghanistan After the Shift to Reliance on Afghan Land Forces, Train and Assist Efforts



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.



Source: Lead Inspector General (LIG), Report to Congress, Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, July 1-September 30, 2020, p. 37, <https://www.dodig.mil/reports.html/Article/2416225/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-freedoms-sentinel-i-quarterly-report-to-th/>.

Losing While “Winning”

From 2014 to the collapse in mid-2021, the Afghan military forces were consistently reported as winning battles in spite of the fact that real-world Taliban gains meant that they were losing the war. **Figure Fourteen** shows the patterns in total 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.

Figure Fourteen also shows the 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.

The official data on “Enemy Initiated Attacks” and “Effective Enemy Initiated Attacks,” in Part One and Part Two of **Figure Fifteen** do provide a crude indication of the increases in Taliban attacks and how much they accelerated after the Peace Agreement was signed, but they are virtually meaningless as measures of Taliban counterinsurgency activity.

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. Moreover, the data on “Effective Enemy Initiated Attacks” versus total “Enemy Initiated Attacks” in Part Two are little more than empty propaganda. Far too often, a seemingly successful clash really ended in a later Afghan withdrawal or arrangement with Taliban forces. The words may imply an ANSDF win, but the end result was a loss.

It is also mildly ironic that the Resolute Support command notified SIGAR in transmitting these data that, “RS reported that due to the end of the Resolute Support Mission, the Casualty Mitigation Team retrograded and the remaining military personnel in Afghanistan will not be able to support the tracking and collection of civilian casualty data. Therefore, RS was able to provide final civilian casualty data for only April and May 2021.”

As for the casualty data, they are uncertain at best. They are based on combat data that often can do little more than guess, and insurgencies often involved major civilian losses as a result of violent efforts to control the civilian population by bodies like the Taliban.

Focusing on Tactical Clashes and Ignoring the Insurgency

Some aspects of the Taliban’s development and success have been described in detail in open source official reporting. A letter dated 20 May 2021 from the Chair of the UN Security Council Committee to the President of the Security Council transmitting an analysis of the Taliban is a good example.²⁶

The Taliban’s sudden gains were the product of all the issues and problems that have just been discussed. However, there is no detailed open source official analysis as of yet for the reasons why the Taliban was able to return during 2002-2014; of its tactics in seeking to gain control of given Districts and other areas; and of its ability to exploit the civil and military weaknesses of the Afghan civil government, local power brokers and factions, the ANSDF, U.S. forces, and allied forces.

Aside from some solid critiques of the Afghan Army and Air Forces by SIGAR and the LIG, there is little official 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, and a majority ended in strengthening the Taliban presence in the area even when they were defeated.

From 2015 onwards, the U.S. command issued “creative” new metrics like those in **Figure Fifteen** whose 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 make 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 also been erratic, and there are major differences by source. The most consistent reporting has been by the *Long War Journal*, which was able to draw upon official reports of district-level data by the Special Investigator General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), and 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.²⁷

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,²⁸

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.”

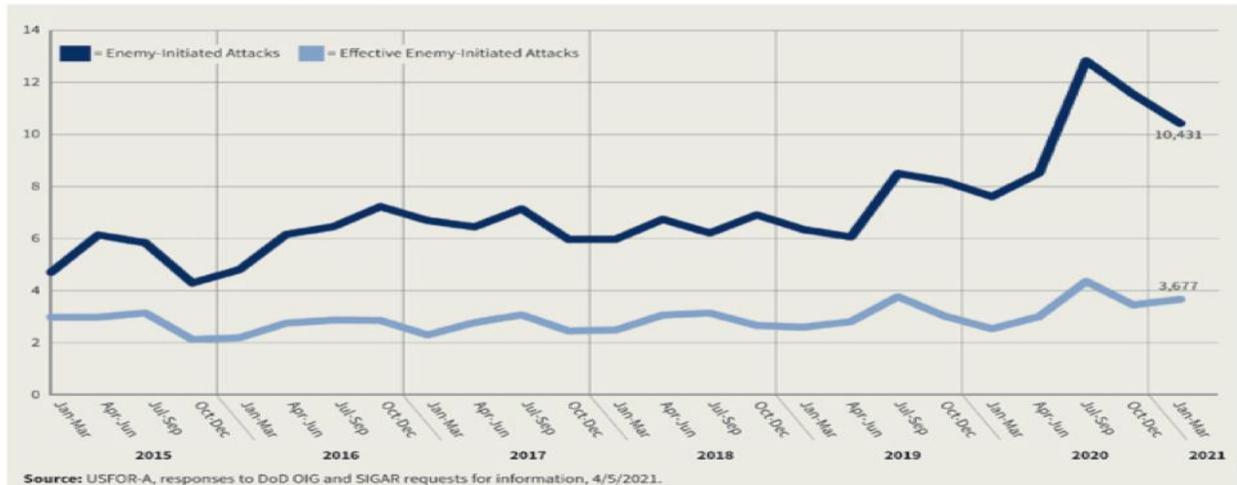
Throughout the war, treating the Taliban as an extremist or terrorist movement seems to have led the U.S. to ignore some of the key causes of what was happening in the field, the gains in the insurgency by district and Afghan location, the civil and military reasons for the Taliban's growing success, 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.

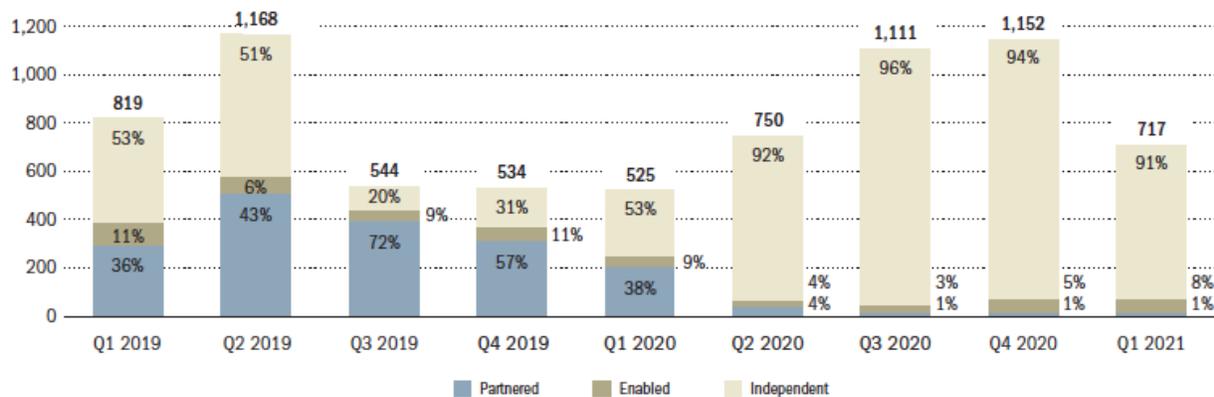
Media, SIGAR, and LIG reporting after 2019 increasingly indicated that U.S. cuts were creating steadily greater dependence on a small portion of the ANA and ANAF, more problems in allocating reinforcements and supplies, and increasingly isolated small deployments of ANA forces in ways that make them 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 may not challenge the Taliban.

Figure Fourteen: Shifts in Afghan Combat Operations and U.S. Combat Air Support

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



ASSF GROUND OPERATIONS BY QUARTER

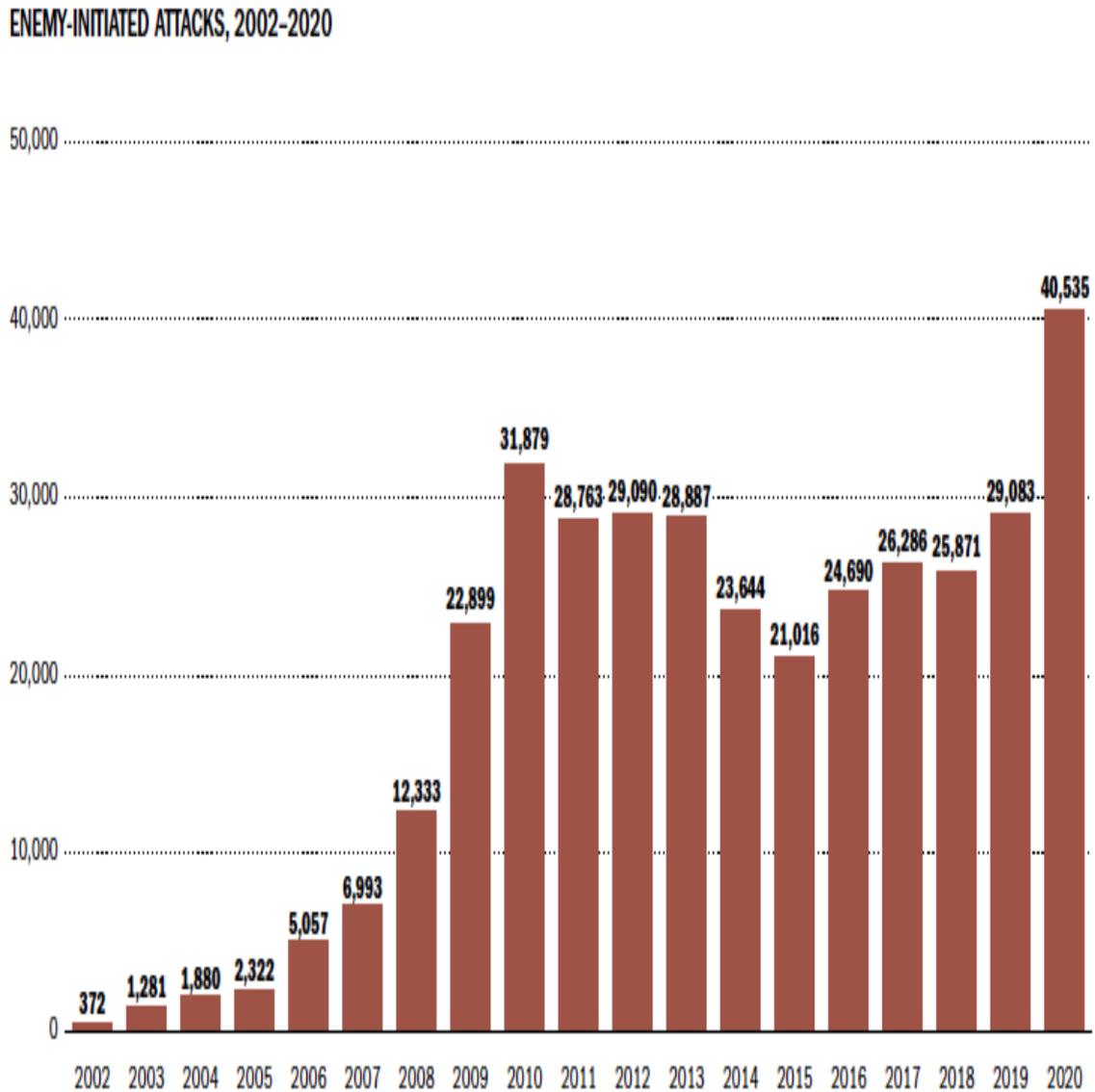


Note: Partnered = operations conducted by ASSF in which U.S./Coalition forces accompany ASSF to the target; Enabled = operations planned and executed by ASSF in which U.S./Coalition forces supply intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, or other support but do not accompany ASSF to the target; Independent = operations planned and executed by ASSF without any U.S./Coalition assistance. Percentages may sum to more than 100% due to rounding.
 Source: NSOCCA, response to SIGAR data call, 4/5/2021; SIGAR, analysis of NSOCCA-provided data, 4/2021.

Number of Weapons Released (Manned & RPA strike assets)

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
2014	92	114	95	115	164	272	205	437	441	217	87	126	2,365
2015	40	30	47	31	41	109	79	156	111	203	69	31	947
2016	127	115	58	62	89	94	160	108	162	205	92	65	1,337
2017	54	200	203	460	328	389	350	503	414	653	352	455	4,361
2018	378	469	339	562	591	572	746	715	841	769	841	539	7,362
2019	463	327	673	548	635	441	613	783	948	777	519	696	7,423
2020	415	360											775

Figure Fifteen: Shifts in Afghan Combat Operations – Part I



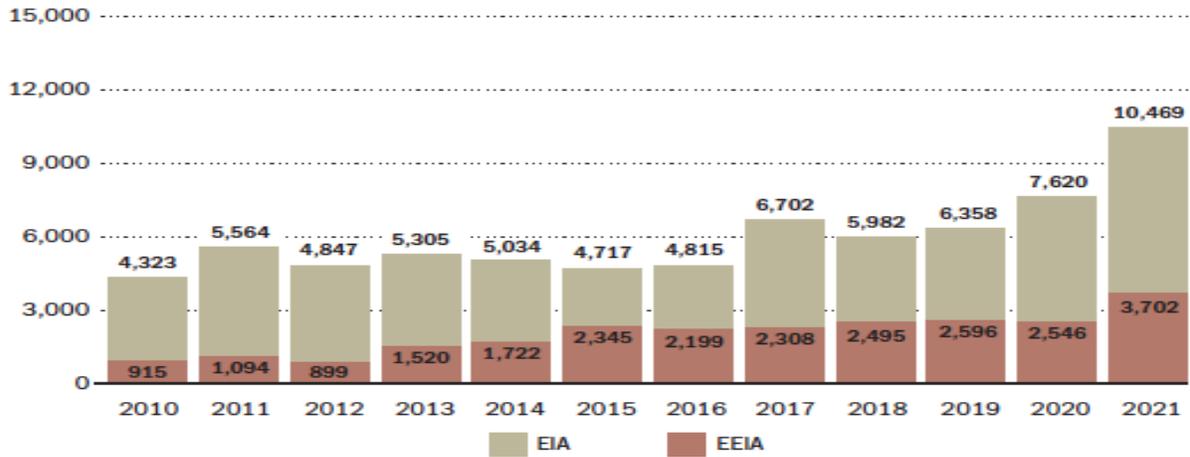
Note: The chart reflects data on enemy-initiated attacks sourced from the Pentagon’s Defense Intelligence Agency for the years 2002 to 2009, and from the U.S. military headquarters in Afghanistan for the years 2010 to 2020. Defense Intelligence Agency data are generally derived from a larger number of sources and therefore captures more incidents, but these additional sources were not available for the full 19 years.

Source: Resolute Support, response to SIGAR data call, April 1, 2021, and June 12, 2021; Resolute Support, response to DOD OIG vetting, October 2019; U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, response to SIGAR data call, April 2015.

Source: SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghan Reconstruction*, August 2021, p. 13, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>.

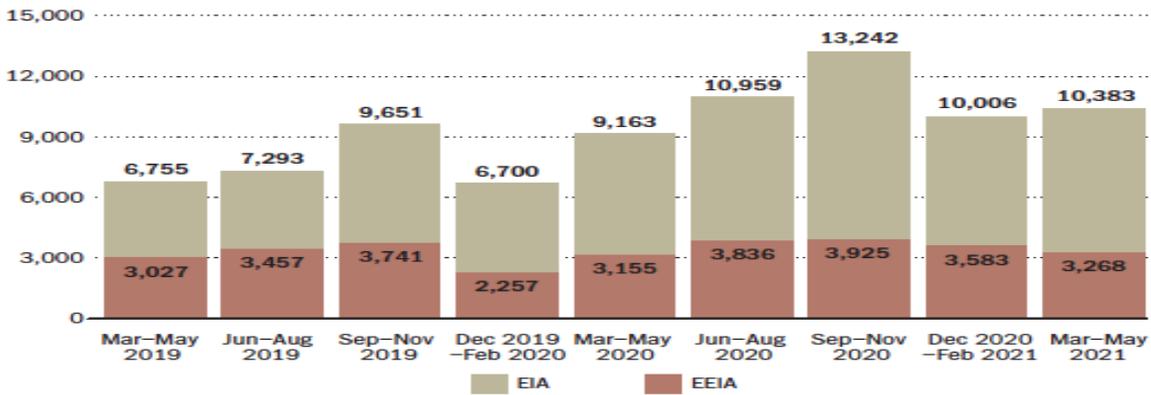
Figure Fifteen: Shifts in Afghan Combat Operations – Part II

FIRST-QUARTER ENEMY-INITIATED ATTACKS SINCE 2010



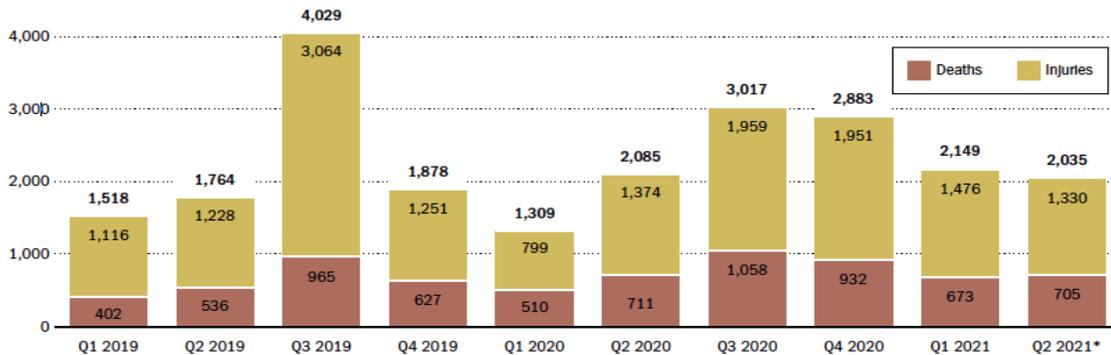
Note: EIA = Enemy-Initiated Attacks. EEIA = Effective Enemy-Initiated Attacks, referring to a subset of enemy-initiated attacks that produced casualties.
 Source: RS, response to SIGAR data call 4/1/2021 and 6/10/2021; SIGAR, analysis of RS-provided data, 7/2021.

ENEMY-INITIATED ATTACKS BY QUARTER FROM MARCH 2019–MAY 2021



Note: EIA = Enemy-Initiated Attacks. EEIA = Effective Enemy-Initiated Attacks, referring to a subset of enemy-initiated attacks that produced casualties.
 Source: RS, response to SIGAR data call 4/1/2021 and 6/12/2021; SIGAR, analysis of RS-provided data, 7/2021.

RS-REPORTED CIVILIAN CASUALTIES BY QUARTER



Source: SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to Congress*, July 30, 2021, p. 58-59

Classifying the Data on Defeat Does Not Amount to Victory

Another key issue that an official analysis of the lessons of the war must address is the extent to which the U.S. and Resolute Support Command did more than create misleading new metrics. The U.S. and ISAF also seem to have suppressed the older metrics tracing the relative success of the ANDSF and Taliban in controlling the countryside and given Districts in Afghanistan. SIGAR describes the history of this growing process of over-classification and non-reporting as follows in its July 30, 2021 report to Congress,²⁹

SIGAR tracked Afghan government population, district, and territorial control from November 2015 until October 2018, using unclassified data provided by Resolute Support. In March 2019, Resolute Support notified SIGAR that it no longer produced its district level stability assessment of Afghan government and insurgent control and influence, claiming they were “of limited decision-making value to the [RS] Commander.” The last time SIGAR published district control assessments was for its January 2019 Quarterly Report to the United States Congress. RS reported then that as of October 2018, of Afghanistan’s then-407 districts, 50 were under insurgent control or influence (12 controlled, 38 influenced).

In the conference report for the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, Congress required DOD to include a section in their semiannual Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan report providing a district-level stability assessment displaying insurgent control versus Afghan government control and influence of districts to include district, population, and territorial control data. The next DOD report, covering the previous six months ending June 30, had not yet been issued as this report went to press. Whether the Afghan government or the insurgents had “control” of a district was a subjective determination based on a number of factors, such as degree of effective Afghan government local governance, security, infrastructure, economic control, and communications, that RS took into consideration (for more detail on metrics Resolute Support used to determine district, population and territorial control see the April 30, 2016, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, p. 96).

Regardless of how Resolute Support once measured district control, that level of detailed, subjective analysis from on-the-ground U.S. or Coalition soldiers no longer exists. The ongoing withdrawal of U.S. and Coalition forces has left open sources such as the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN), the Long War Journal (LWJ), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and Gandhara (Radio Free Afghanistan) to fill the void on what is happening in Afghanistan’s districts, especially those furthest from Kabul. These organizations define and determine “district control” in various ways, including press reports, government agency statements, their own reporters and contacts, and the Taliban, often through social media.

Put bluntly, much of the official reporting on the course of the war became a dangerous liar’s contest, although more through lies of omission than false reporting. The growth of the Taliban presence in rural areas was rarely addressed. Official reporting focused on Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) “defeats” of the Taliban and were tied almost exclusively to Taliban initiated attacks – and where the ability of Afghan government forces to win a tactical engagement was not followed by the capability to “hold” or provide lasting security.

“Independent” ANDSF action usually involved high levels of U.S. intelligence and advisory support, and reporting often never mentioned help from elite U.S. troops and intelligence personnel or dependence on contractors for sustainability and actual operations as well as sometimes on U.S. air strikes. This uncredited help was almost always critical when the ANDSF had to deal with major Taliban operation.

It seems likely that any independent study of the course of the war that is given access to the full classified intelligence and other official reporting on the relative level of ANDSF and Taliban conflict and control by District over time will reveal that the ANDSF, U.S., and NATO steadily lost access to reliable data on Taliban gains in rural areas and its ability to generate selective and more serious attacks on urban areas – including Kabul.

Once again, it is far from clear that the U.S., Resolute Support, or Taliban analysis went beyond the tactical level to fully analyze why and how the Taliban was expanding its influence at the financial, civil, and political level in a given District, city, or area. However, much of this reporting seems to have focused on the narrow tactical threat that it defined as an “attack” or act of “terrorism,” rather than the broader threat from insurgency.

It is equally unclear how well the ANDSF, U.S., and NATO focused on the role of independent, Afghan officials and security personnel as well as local power brokers in tolerating Taliban operations. The same seems true of analyzing Taliban’s sources of income from narcotics, its growing control over roads and checkpoints, and its ability to extort funds from Afghans even in more secure areas. Official sources also do not seem to have fully recognized the growing Taliban threat to Northern Afghanistan and to the border crossings where duties and charges are one of the Afghan central government’s few real sources of income from within Afghanistan.

Some media reports do indicate that some intelligence experts were far less optimistic than others, and the CIA was far more critical of ANDSF performance than military intelligence experts in the Pentagon and USCENTCOM. The open source data involved has so far been so vague, however, that there is no way to validate such reporting. There are only a few official indications that intelligence reporting was sometimes far less reassuring than the official statements and open source metrics.

There is no way to know the full validity of the media reporting after the collapse that claimed intelligence had warned the NSC and the White House that the situation was becoming extremely serious and at least flagged the possibility of collapse. SIGAR’s report to Congress on the first quarter of 2021 did note, however, that the Taliban’s successes were growing sharply before the sudden collapse of the Afghan forces and government,³⁰

In addition to capturing districts, the Taliban have taken at least six international border crossings and hold long stretches of highways throughout the country, according to the AAN. This not only denies the Afghan government significant revenue from taxes on international trade, but also provides far more opportunities for the Taliban to raise their own revenue by taxing traders and extorting travelers at checkpoints.

The Taliban seized six total border crossings this quarter, including four major border crossings, with the potential to deny the Afghan government significant customs revenue. On June 22, 2021, Taliban forces captured the U.S.-financed Sher Khan Bandar border crossing in Kunduz Province between Afghanistan and Tajikistan after 134 border guards and other Afghan troops fled into Tajikistan. According to a Taliban spokesperson, the Taliban have kept this crossing open to cross-border trade and have begun to collect customs revenue. In early July, Afghan officials acknowledged that the Taliban had captured the Torghundi border crossing with Turkmenistan and the Islam Qala border crossing in western Herat Province, a main gateway for trade with Iran. On July 14, there were also reports that Taliban forces seized the Spin Boldak crossing with Pakistan in Kandahar Province. This crossing is one of the busiest entry points into the country and a primary trade link between southern Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The Taliban’s occupation of key border crossings could deny potentially significant levels of customs revenue to the Afghan government, further inhibiting its ability to generate sufficient domestic revenues. In FY 1399, the border crossings in Herat, Kandahar, and Kunduz Provinces generated 34.3% of the Afghan government’s total customs revenues, according to Afghan government accounting data.

Comparing Different Estimates of the Growth in Taliban Control and Indicators of the Progress of the Taliban Insurgency

It is also possible to contrast different *open source* views of how the Taliban threat increased after 2011 and the rising scale of its major gains. Many did show that the situation was becoming far more serious than official briefings indicated and raise serious questions about how well

intelligence experts reported on the uncertainties they face, how much of their analysis reached commanders and policy makers, and who – if anyone – decided not to report accurately or honestly on the trends involved.

- **Figure Sixteen** shows a generic “terrorist view of the threat” dating back to 2011 – and that continued to be circulated in some form through 2013 – which 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 Seventeen** 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 Eighteen** compares an optimistic 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 Nineteen** shows the differences when areas of both Taliban combat and support activity in 2015 are estimated and displayed.
- **Figure Twenty** provides a BBC estimate for 2017 that does not show the outside source of the BBC data.
- **Figure Twenty-One** shows some of the last official estimates before the official data were classified, and the Long War Journal data for 2018.³¹
- **Figure Twenty-Two** 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 website 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-Three** provides a SIGAR graphic showing just how different the levels of gains on each side can appear given different sources and different graphics.
- **Figure Twenty-Four** shows a snapshot for August 6th from a Gandhara estimate of how much – and how quickly – the situation deteriorated from early 2021 to early August 2021, although it should be stressed that official command data remained classified.³²
- **Figure Twenty-Five** is the BBC estimate for the same day as Figure Twenty-Four.

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 whether the Taliban can win a full “victory” will have to be based on the actual outcome of the fighting and the actual political negotiations and settlements that follow.

It will take full access to U.S., NATO/ISAF, and Afghan government classified data – as well as a careful study of Taliban claims – to determine the actual growth of Taliban forces, the military

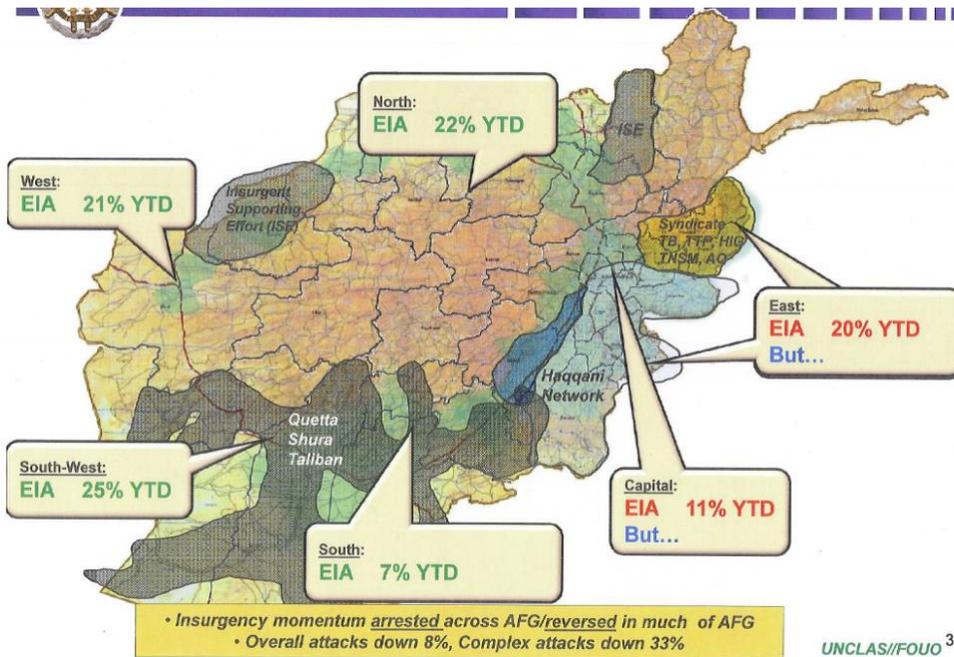
and civil measures the Taliban used to take control by District, and the reasons given Districts altered in vulnerability – if such data even exist.

The maps in **Figures Sixteen to Twenty-Five** 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 Taliban 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) deserves special attention and is often the uncredited source of media maps of Taliban 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 seems likely that Taliban 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 Taliban became divided or otherwise defeated itself.

Figure Sixteen: A View of the “Terrorist” Threat in 2011



(U) AFPAK Threat Groups

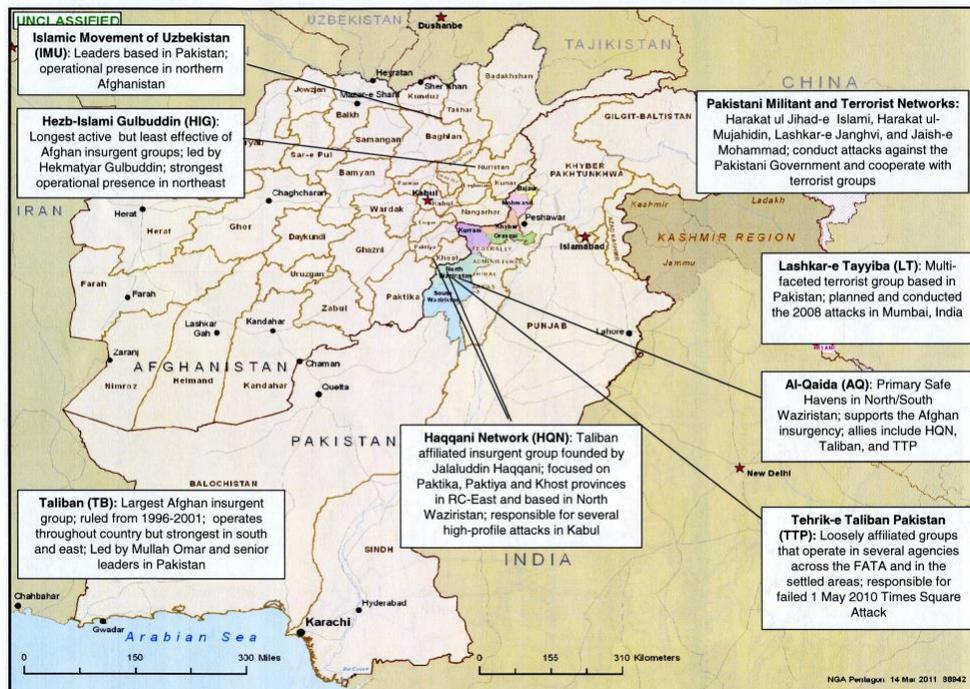
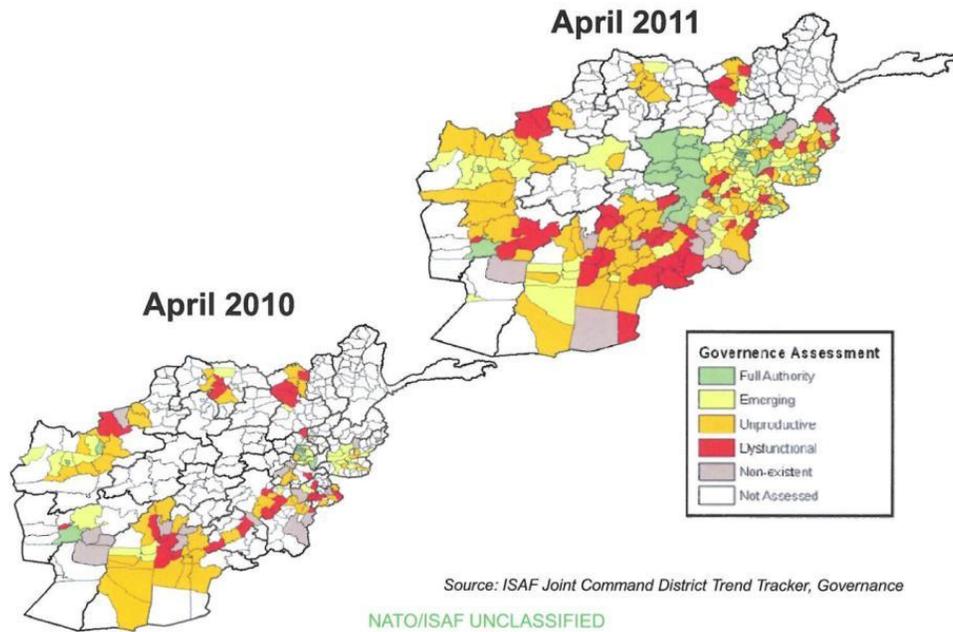


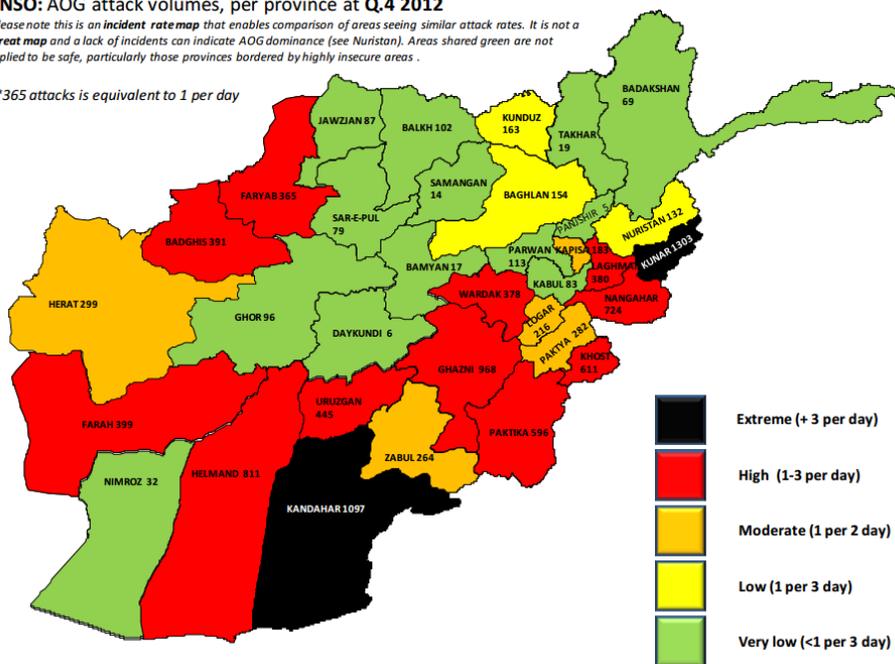
Figure Seventeen: “Mission Impossible” Projected Gains in District Security and Governance vs Growing Taliban Activity in 2010-2012 – I



ANSO: AOG attack volumes, per province at Q.4 2012

(Please note this is an incident rate map that enables comparison of areas seeing similar attack rates. It is not a threat map and a lack of incidents can indicate AOG dominance (see Nuristan). Areas shaded green are not implied to be safe, particularly those provinces bordered by highly insecure areas.)

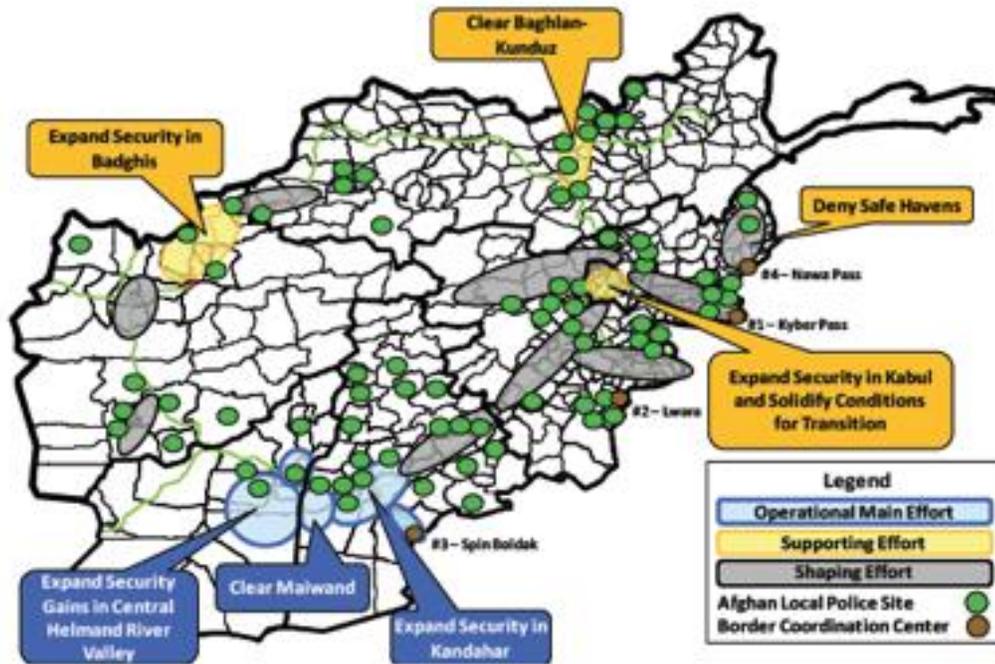
*365 attacks is equivalent to 1 per day



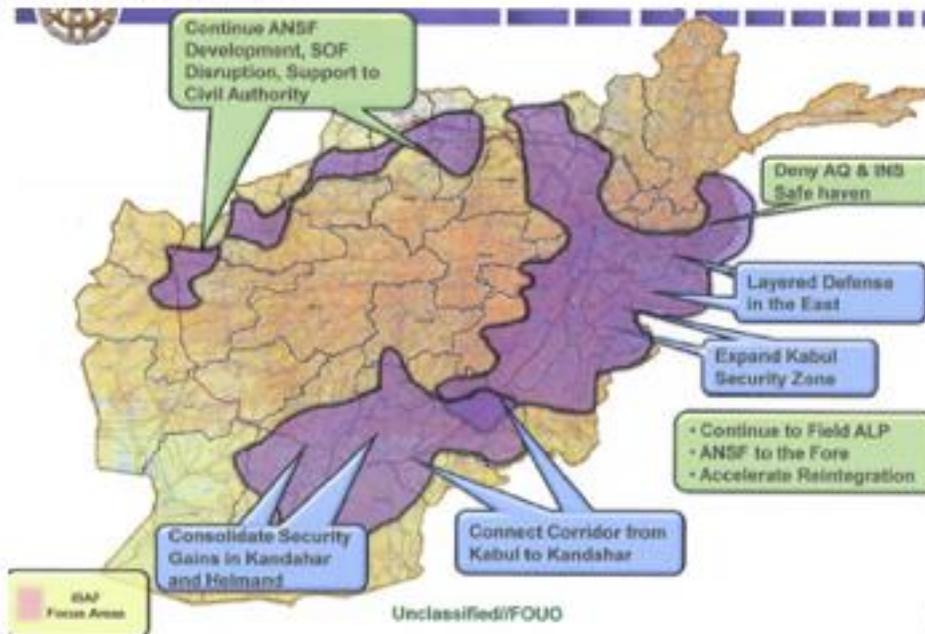
Source: NATO-ISAF handouts 2012.

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

Concept of Operations at End 2011



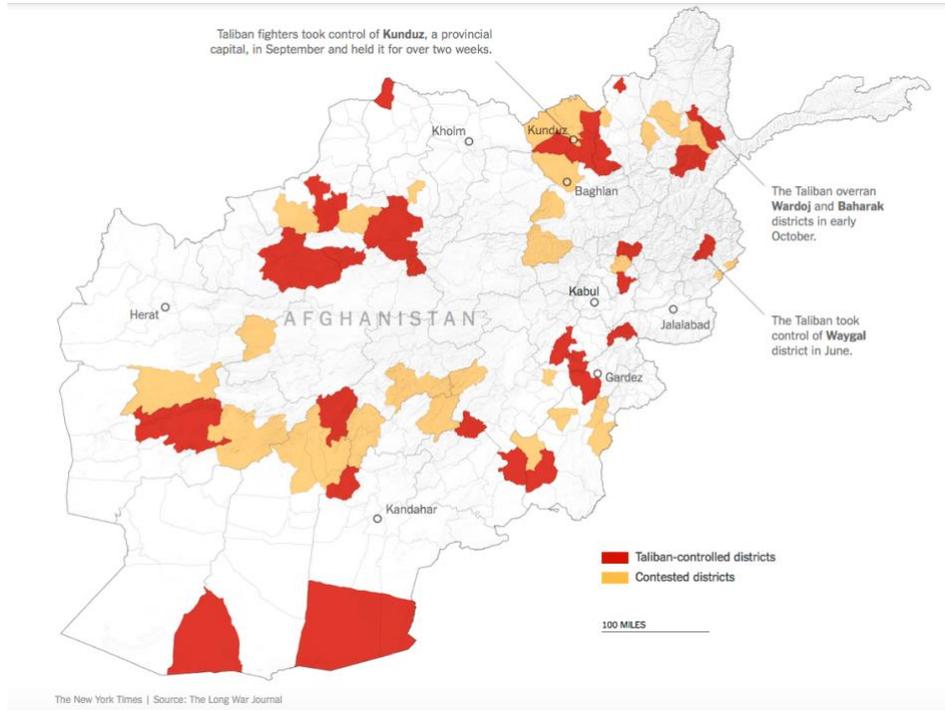
NATO-ISAF Goals for 2012



Source: NATO/ISAF End 2011

Figure Eighteen: Two Different Ways to Measure Taliban Influence in 2015

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

More than half of the districts in Afghanistan are rated by the United Nations as having either a substantial, high or extreme level of risk.

- 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.

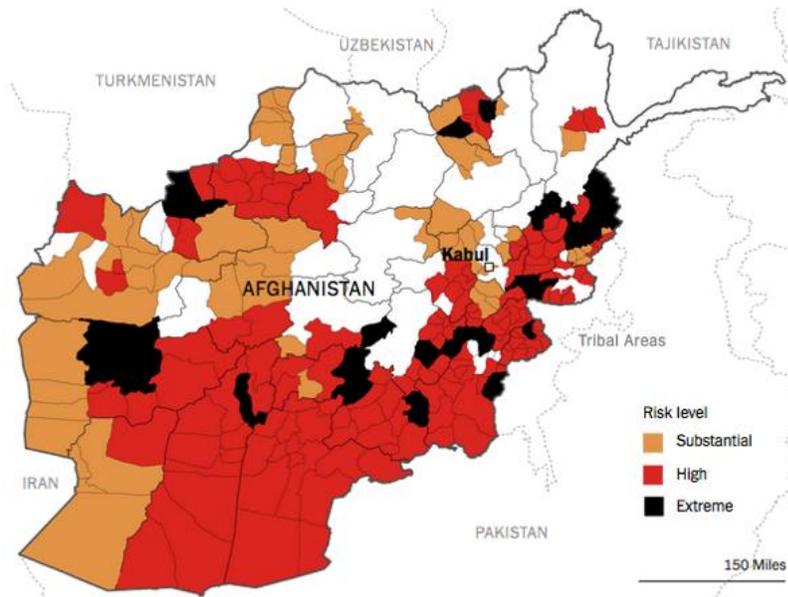
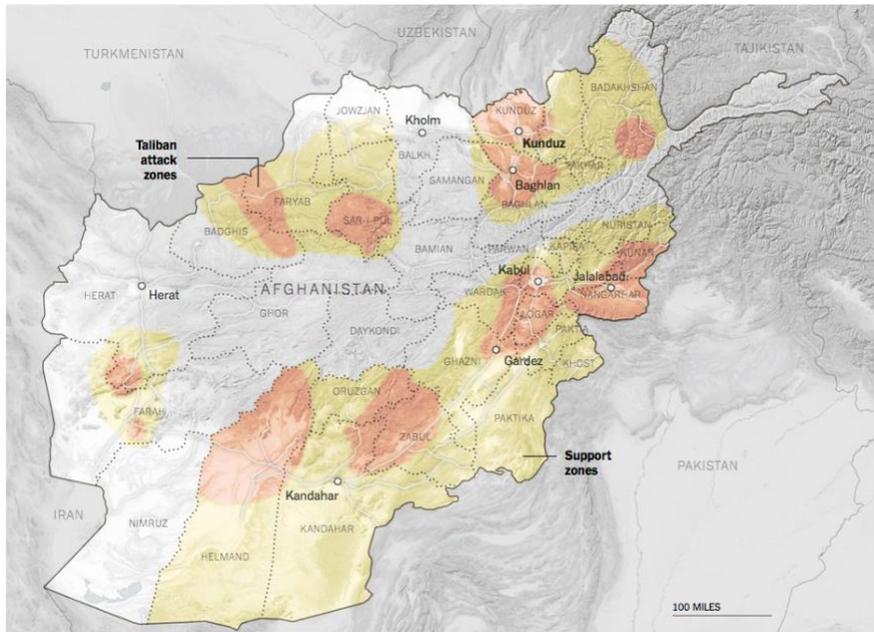


Figure Nineteen: Contrasting Views of Taliban Influence in 2015

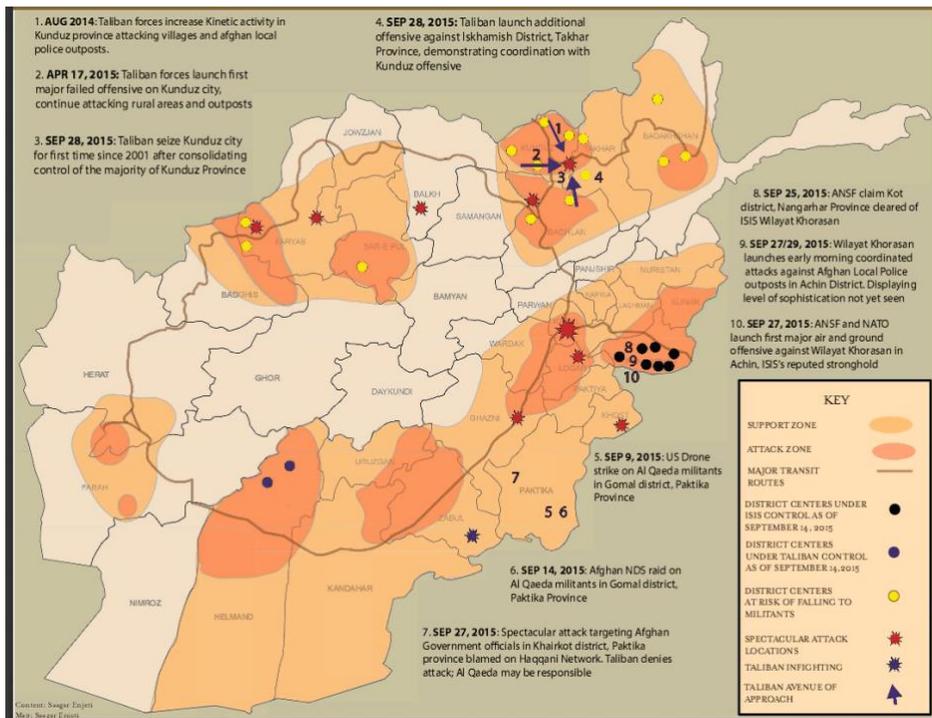
Institute for Study of War Map of “Zones”: 30/9/2015



The New York Times | Source: Institute for the Study of War

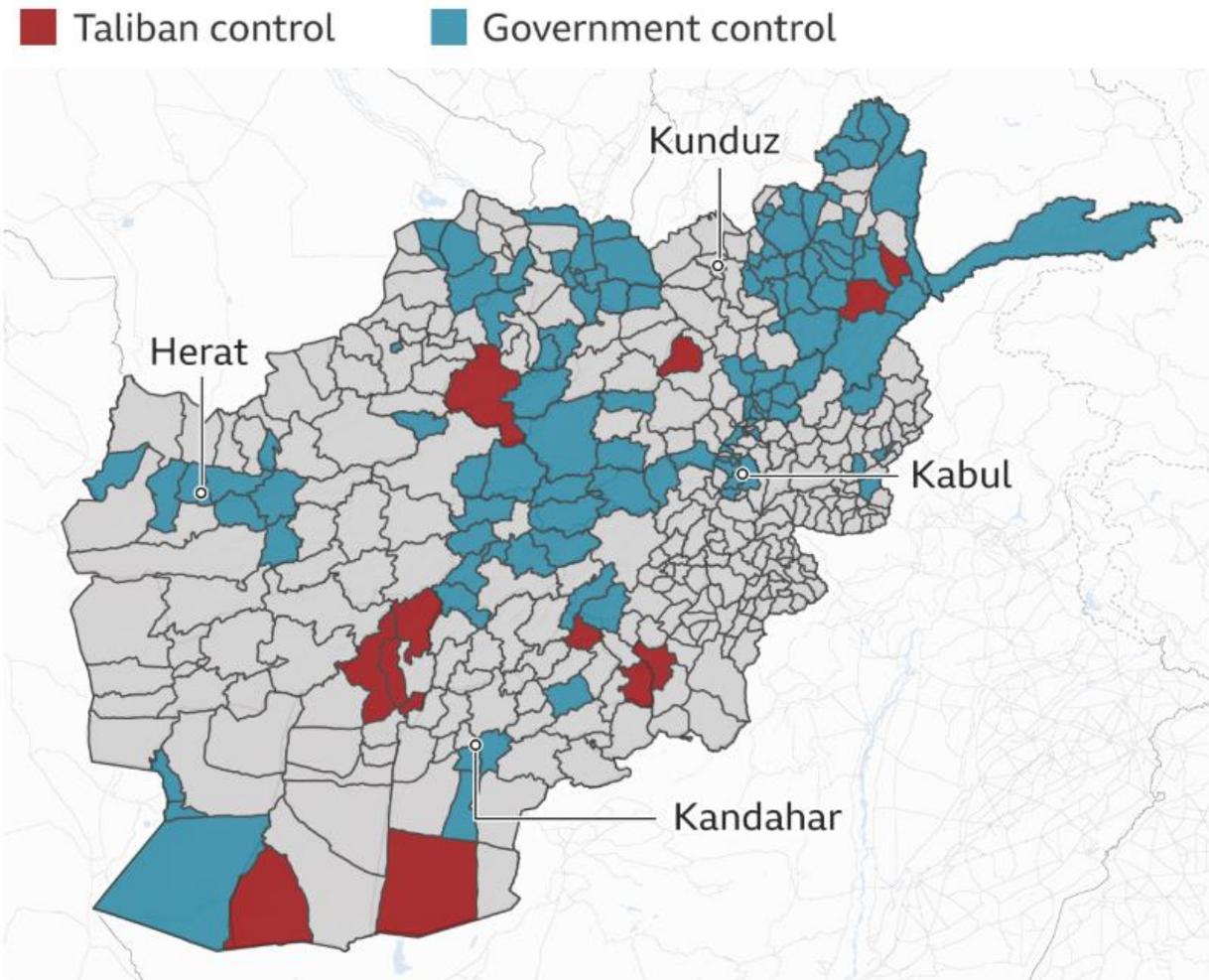
Source: Sarah Almukhtar, and Karen Yourish, “More than 14 Years After U.S. Invasion, the Taliban Control Large Parts of Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, April 19, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/29/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-maps.html>.

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>.

Figure Twenty: BBC Estimate of Control in 2017



Districts according to 2005 Afghanistan government boundaries

Source: BBC research 2017

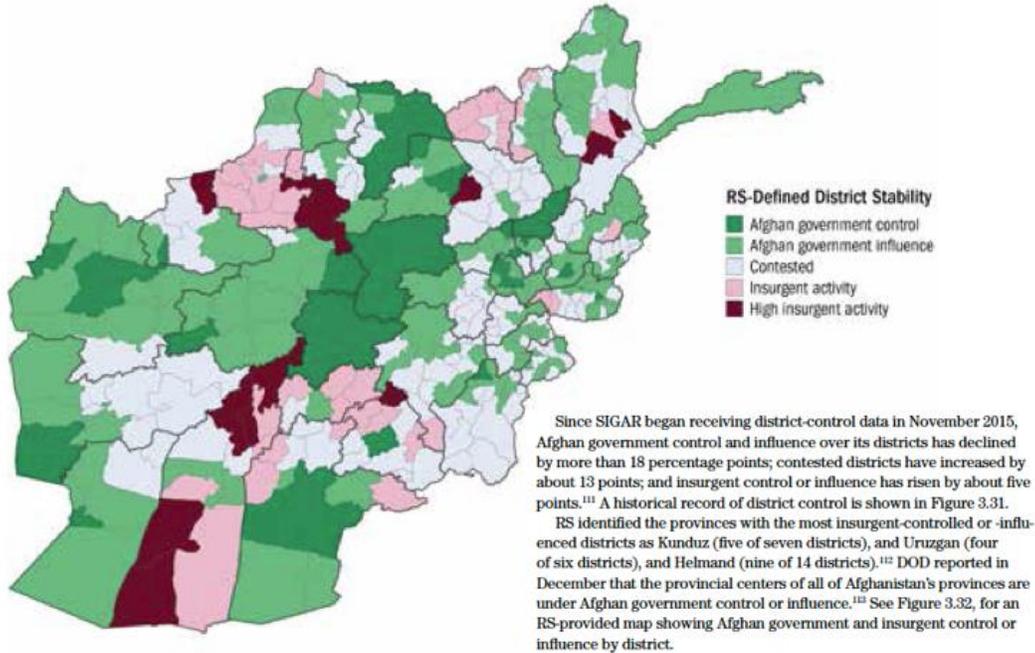


About 15 million people - half the population - were reported to be living in areas either controlled by the Taliban or where the Taliban were openly present and regularly mounted attacks against government forces.

Source: BBC, Mapping the advance of the Taliban in Afghanistan, The Visual Journalism Team, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57933979>.

Figure Twenty-One: Contrasting Views of Taliban Influence in 2018

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

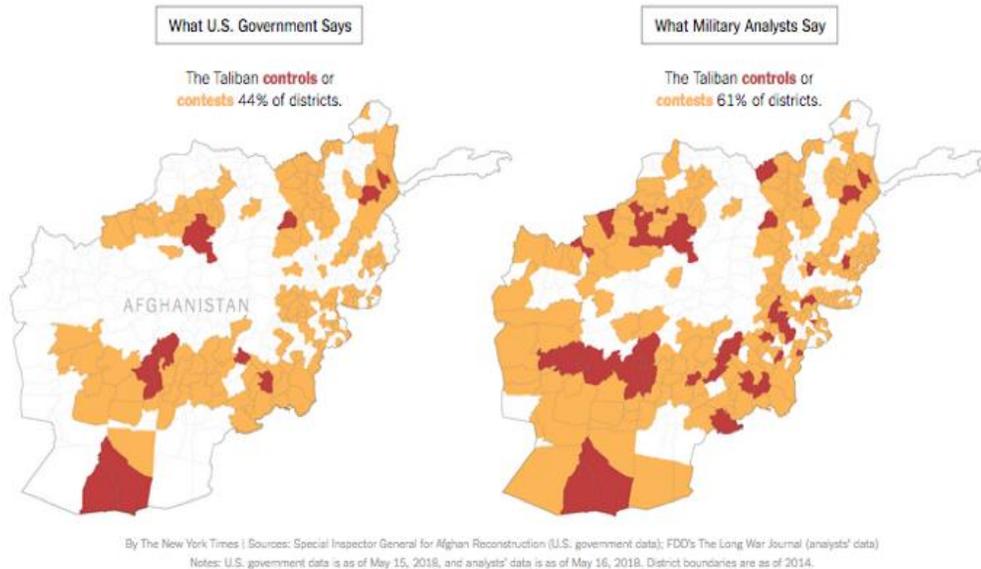


Note: A district is assigned its district-stability level based on the overall trend of land-area/population control of each district as a whole.

Source: RS, response to SIGAR data call, 12/20/2018.

Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Reconstruction Update, January 30, 2019, p. 71.

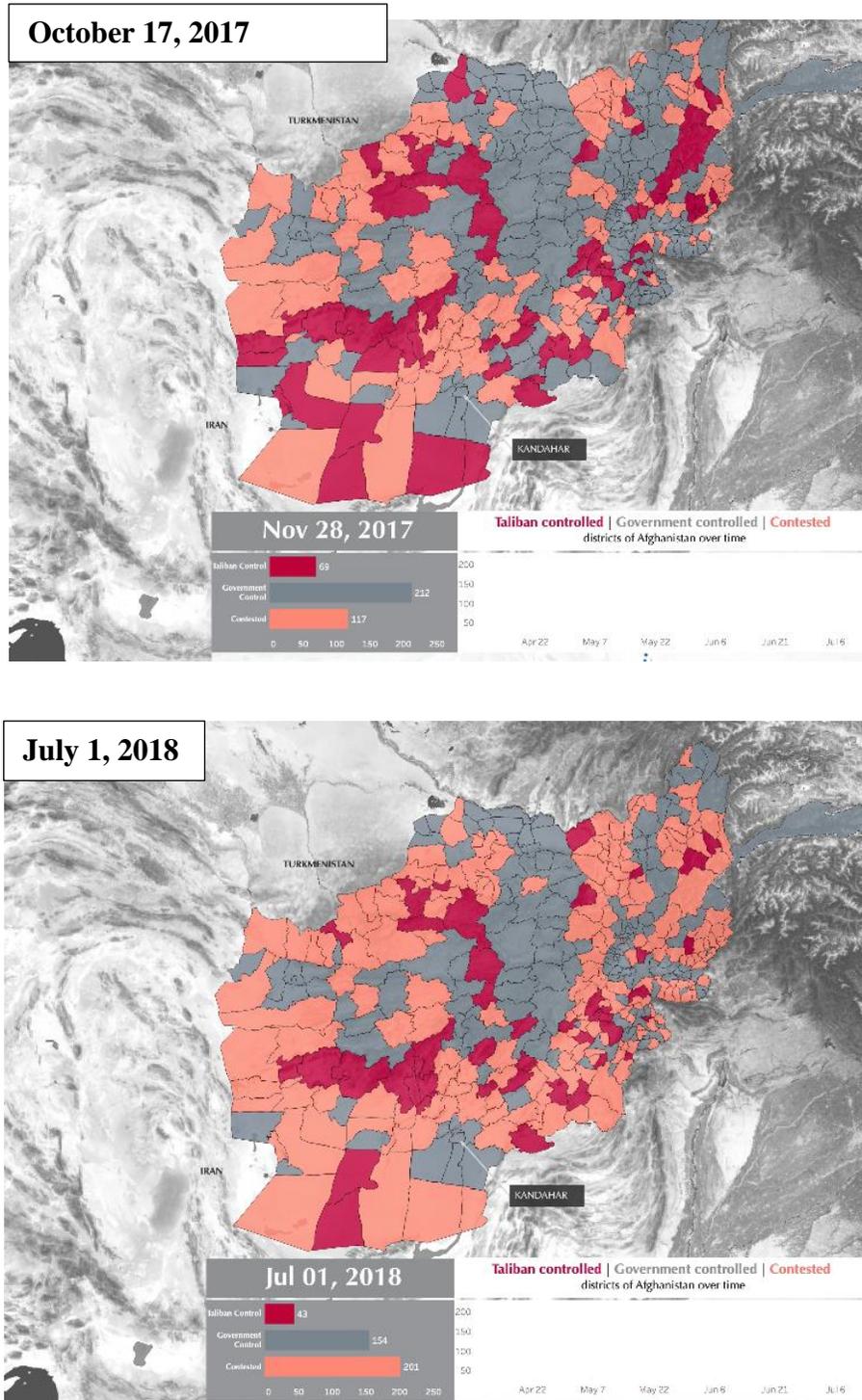
SIGAR versus Long War Journal Estimates of Taliban Control: May 2018



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 NGU and FAHIM ABED, **How the U.S. Government Misleads the Public on Afghanistan**, New York Times By SEPT. 8, 2018

Figure Twenty-Two: Long War Journal Maps from 2017 to 2021 – I



Source: Bill Roggio, “Mapping Taliban Contested and Controlled Districts in Afghanistan,” July 2021, *Long War Journal*, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan>.

Figure Twenty-Two: Long War Journal Maps from 2017 to 2021 – II

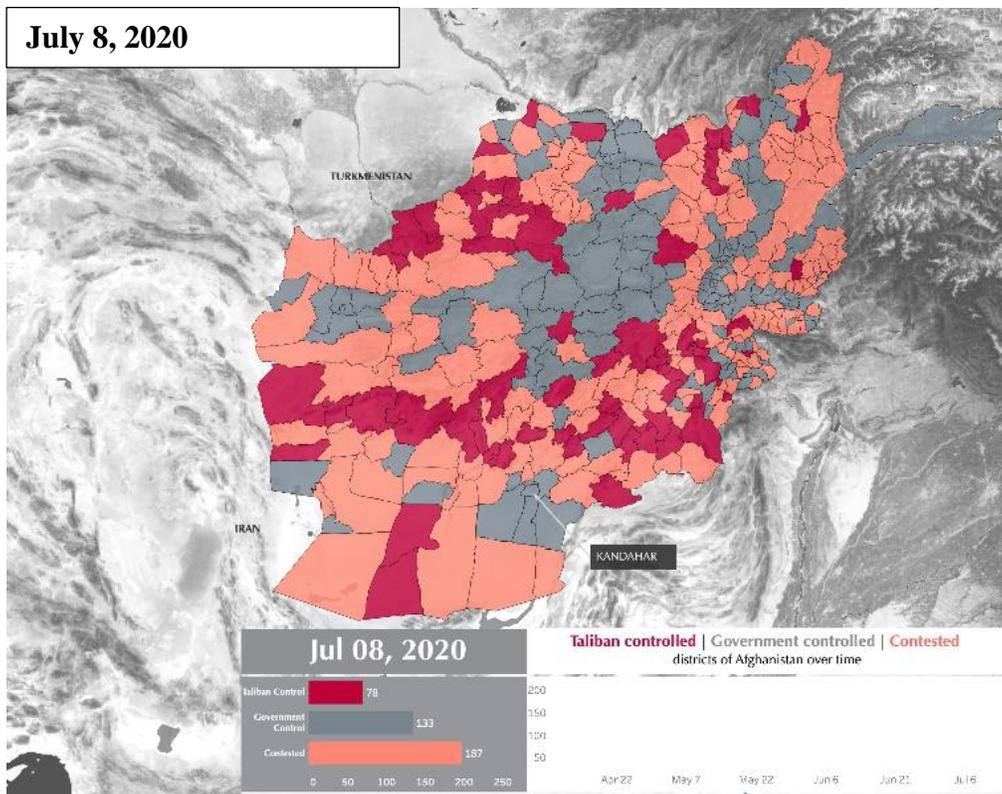
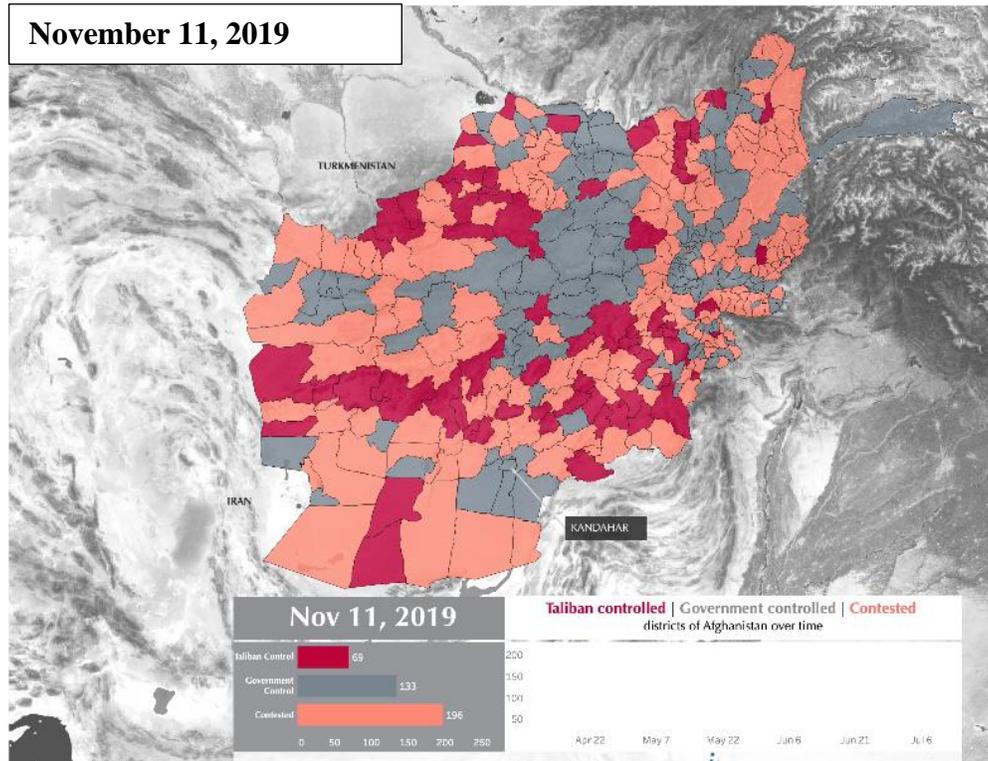


Figure Twenty-Two: Long War Journal Maps from 2017 to 2021– III

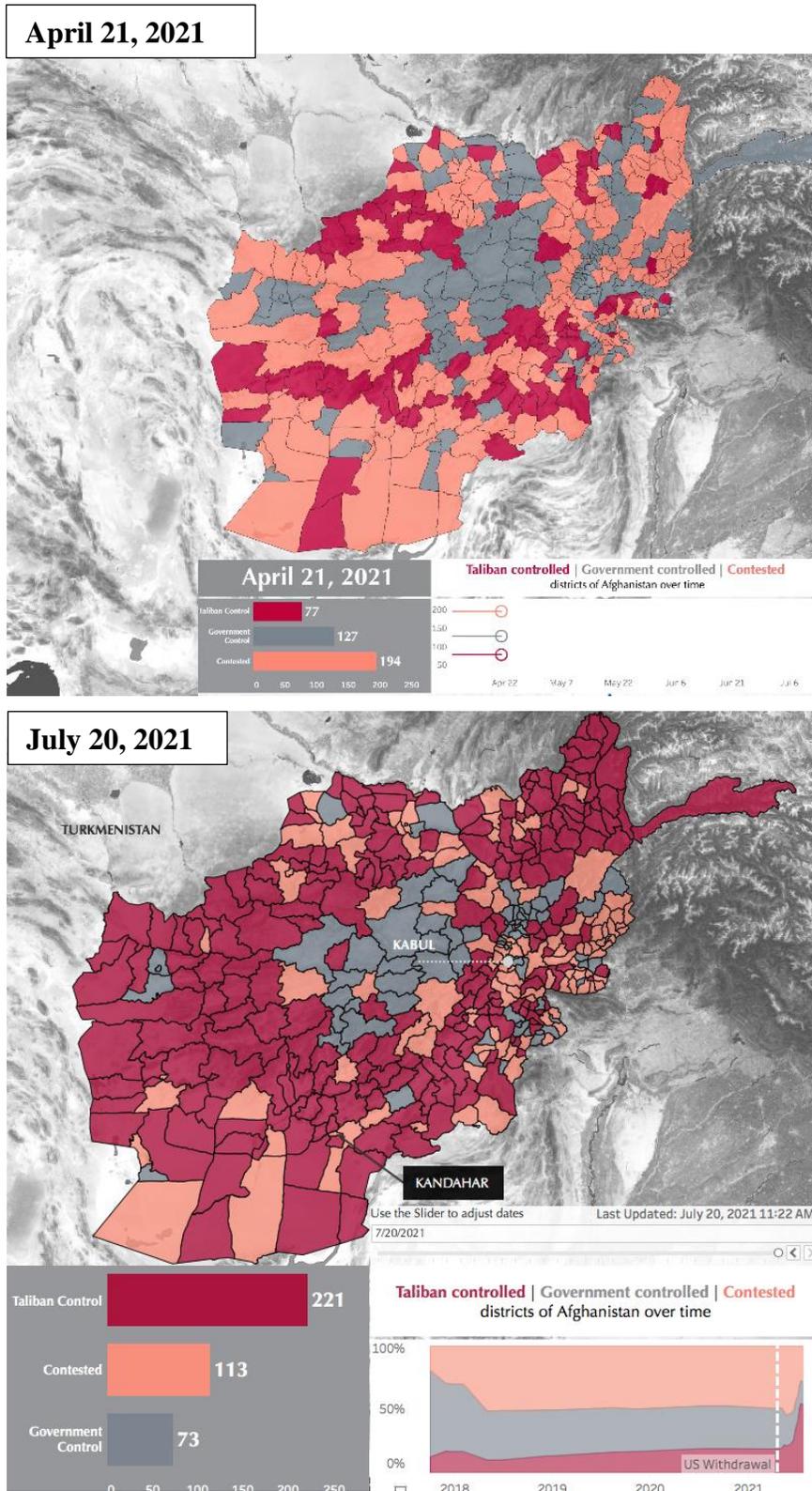
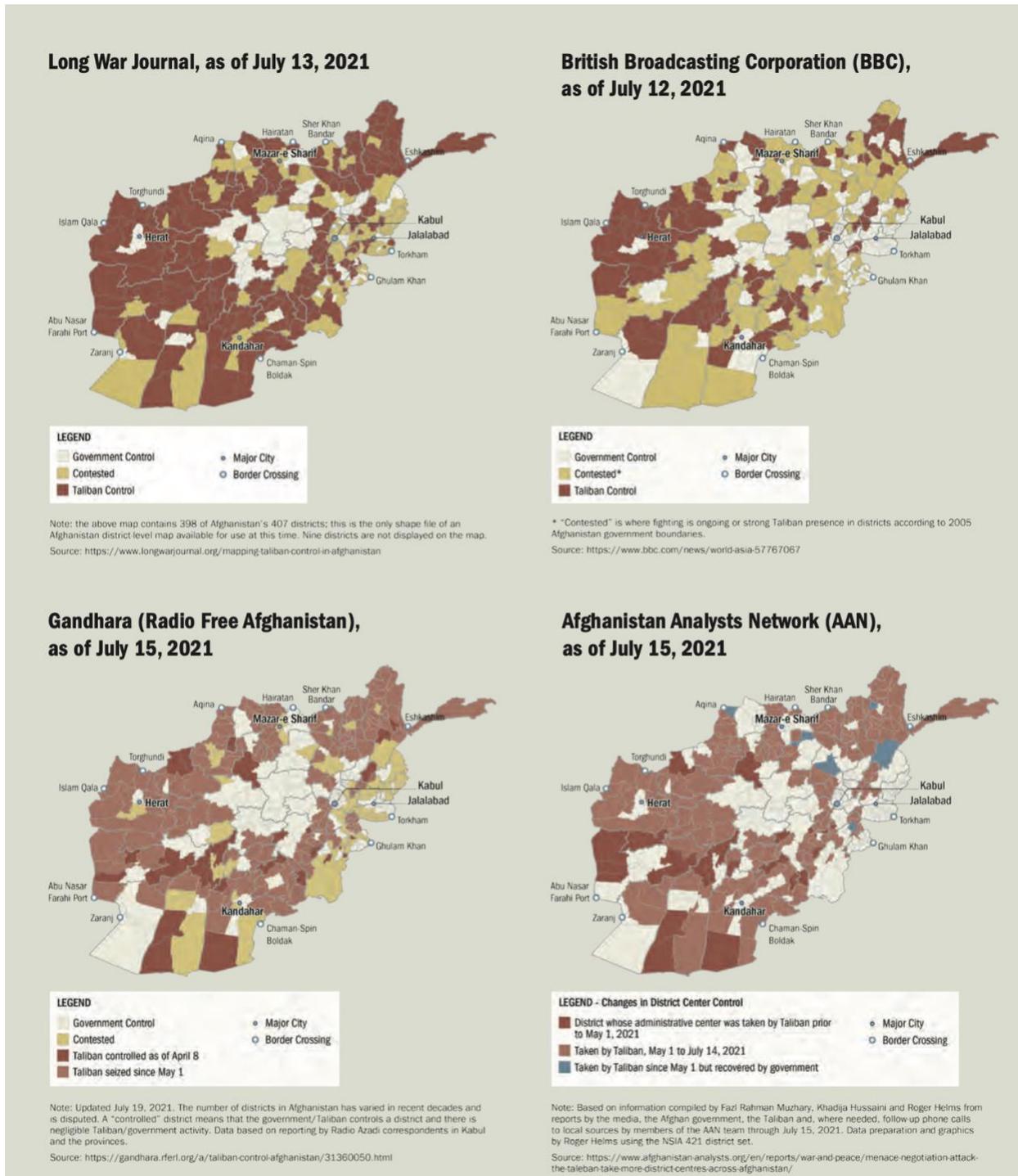
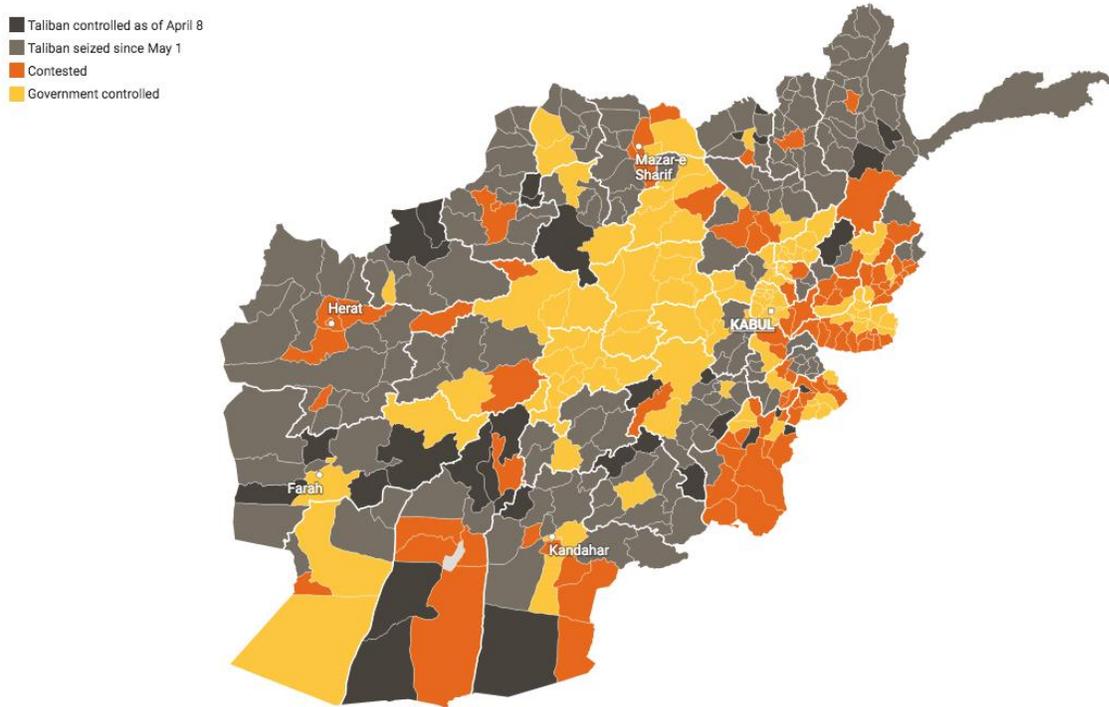


Figure Twenty-Three: Different Estimates of Control in Mid-July 2021



Source: SIGAR, 52nd Quarterly Report to Congress, June 30, 2021, p. 54.

Figure Twenty-Four: Gandhara Estimate of the Growing Risk of a Taliban Victory in 2021 - August 6, 2021



Updated August 6, 2021
The number of districts in Afghanistan has varied in recent decades and is disputed.
A "controlled" district means that the government/Taliban controls a district and there is negligible Taliban/government activity.
Data based on reporting by Radio Azadi correspondents in Kabul and the provinces.
Map: Carlos Coelho • Source: RFE/RL's Radio Azadi • Get the data • Embed • Download image • Created with Datawrapper

Source: "Interactive Map: Taliban Control In Afghanistan Then And Now," Gandhara, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/taliban-control-afghanistan/31360050.html> and <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/kandahar-afghanistan-taliban/31384305.html>.

The February 2020 Peace Agreement: From Announcing Withdrawal to the Collapse of the Afghan Government and Forces

The later Figures in this series have many uncertainties, but they clearly show that the end result of the combination of Taliban gains before 2020, the February 2020 peace agreement, and U.S. and allied withdrawals was a catalytic series of battles where the Taliban steadily gathered momentum, suddenly took control over most Districts, seized major cities, and finally took control of Kabul. The Taliban eventually took all of the major cities shown in **Figure Twenty-Six** in a matter of days and secured virtually all of the border posts shown in **Figure Twenty-Seven**.

The exact chronology of how the Taliban won, of the size and impact of given U.S. withdrawals, and of any U.S. plans to keep supporting the Afghan government and forces before the collapse will require careful study. The closest thing to a detailed official statement of the future U.S. military role in Afghanistan before the collapse seems to be the SIGAR report to Congress dated July 20, 2021,³³

Testifying before the SASC on May 5, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense Helvey said, “We will continue funding key capabilities such as the Afghan Air Force and Special Mission Wing, we will continue paying salaries for Afghan security forces, and we will continue delivering certain military supplies, and we are developing the mechanisms to provide appropriate oversight for the use of these funds most of which will continue to be executed through DOD contracts.”

On June 17, Secretary of Defense Austin testified to the Senate Appropriations Committee, “We will now transition to a new bilateral relationship with our Afghan partners ... but one that will not require a U.S. footprint larger than what’s necessary to protect our diplomats.” Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley added, “It’s the president’s intent to keep an embassy open, to keep our security forces around the embassy and to continue to work with the Afghan government to continue to fund the Afghan security forces and to keep that situation from devolving into the worst case and that’s what we’re planning on and that’s what we’re working toward. There are no guarantees in any of this.

U.S. military contractors are also being withdrawn from Afghanistan, as stipulated in the February 29, 2020, U.S.-Taliban agreement. These contractors provide an array of functions, including logistics, maintenance, and training support for ANDSF ground vehicles and aircraft; security; base support; and transportation services. Their loss could significantly impact ANDSF sustainability, in particular their ability to maintain aircraft and vehicles. Secretary Austin said in a June 23, 2021, House Armed Services Committee hearing that “Some of the [aircraft] maintenance is taking place in... one of the Gulf countries, one of our partners ... and we may be able to contract other types of capabilities going forward. That’s still a work in progress.”

Afghanistan, better connectivity with contacts in the continental United States, and potentially more personnel continuity due to longer tours of duty.

What is clear, however, is that almost all openly reported U.S. military forces and contractors were withdrawn by early July 2021. Media sources indicate that major reductions have taken place in intelligence personnel, diplomats, and military personnel in classified assignments. SIGAR reports that,³⁴

At the end of the drawdown an estimated 650 U.S. troops will remain to assist with security at U.S. Embassy Kabul. This is down from 2,500 last quarter... CENTCOM estimated it had completed more than half of the retrograde process by June 14, and more than 90% by July 5. This process included 984 C-17 transport aircraft loads out of Afghanistan, more than 17,000 pieces of equipment turned over to DLA for disposition, and 10 facilities, including Bagram Airfield, handed over to Afghanistan’s Ministry of Defense. Included in the retrograde are thousands of vehicles and other equipment, including over 400 pieces of rolling stock and more than 6,600 pieces of non-rolling stock. The two most expensive retrograded items were 14 air-defense artillery pieces valued at more than \$144 million, and five “Enhanced Sentinel FMTVs (Family of Medium Tactical Vehicles)” valued at more than \$16 million.

...As of early June 2021, there were 7,795 DOD contractor personnel supporting agency operations in Afghanistan. This includes 2,656 U.S. citizens, 2,491 third-country nationals, and 2,648 Afghan nationals. The contractor count last quarter was 16,832 (6,147 U.S., 6,399 third-country nationals, and 4,286 Afghans). This represents a decrease of 9,037 total contractors (about 54%), including 3,491 U.S. contractors (about 57%) from the previous quarter.

However, DOD noted that since the numbers were taken from a census in early June, they “have since decreased due to ongoing redeployment and related drawdown activities in accordance with the President’s direction.”

SIGAR also reported, however, that,³⁵

Security assistance to Afghanistan is now conducted “over-the-horizon” from Qatar by the Defense Security Cooperation Management Office- Afghanistan (DSCMO-A). Resolute Support cautioned that “OTH does not equal over-the-shoulder” oversight, and acknowledged that the reduced presence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan will constrain DSCMO-A’s capacity to monitor ANDSF use of ASFF funds and procured materials. DSCMO-A now provides security assistance through videoconference meetings at both the senior-leader level and at the directorate and branch levels “to ensure sustained pay, maintenance, logistics, and Foreign Military Sales (FMS) support,” much as they did the past year under COVID-19 restrictions. In addition, DSCMO-A said they will mitigate misuse of ASFF funds through end-use monitoring (EUM) of critical equipment, using local national contractors as the “on-ground eyes and ears for the U.S. government,” and remote monitoring of pay and logistics databases. DSCMO-A explained that the local national contractors “send pictures and write-ups as deliverables to enable the projects to stay on schedule.” This was also standard procedure before the retrograde.

Over-the-horizon DSCMO-A support has some advantages despite the elimination of face-to-face contact with their Afghan counterparts, according to Resolute Support. RS claimed that in some cases they provide “the exact same level of support to the ANDSF from over-the-horizon that was provided while in Afghanistan.” For example, DSCMO-A Human Resources Management continues with the same scheduled meetings over the same communications platforms they used in Afghanistan, and still maintains system configuration control, management, and oversight of the Afghan Personnel and Pay System (APPS). RS claimed that some advantages of over-the-horizon support include a longer personnel transition time (seven to 10 days, as opposed to two to three days) between incumbent and replacement due to the elimination of transit time into Afghanistan, better connectivity with contacts in the continental United States, and potentially more personnel continuity due to longer.

It will take a full study of the lessons of the war to clarify how much of the collapse was the result of the U.S. announcements that it was withdrawing and its actual withdrawals, the many structural failures in the U.S. and international civil and military aid and assistance efforts, Taliban skills, and the inherent weaknesses in Afghan governance and security forces. It is important to note, however, that Afghan perspectives can be very different from American ones and also need to be considered.

An op-ed in the Washington Post by Lt. General Sami Sadat – former commander of 215 Maiwand Corps and an officer that President Ashraf Ghani named commander of Afghanistan’s special forces shortly before the collapse, provides a different view of events that a study of lessons must also consider.³⁶

I am exhausted. I am frustrated. And I am angry... President Biden said last week that “American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves.”... It’s true that the Afghan Army lost its will to fight. But that’s because of the growing sense of abandonment by our American partners and the disrespect and disloyalty reflected in Mr. Biden’s tone and words over the past few months. The Afghan Army is not without blame. It had its problems — cronyism, bureaucracy — but we ultimately stopped fighting because our partners already had.

It pains me to see Mr. Biden and Western officials are blaming the Afghan Army for collapsing without mentioning the underlying reasons that happened. Political divisions in Kabul and Washington strangled the

army and limited our ability to do our jobs. Losing combat logistical support that the United States had provided for years crippled us, as did a lack of clear guidance from U.S. and Afghan leadership.

... exhausted and frustrated as I am, I wanted to offer a practical perspective and defend the honor of the Afghan Army. I'm not here to absolve the Afghan Army of mistakes. But the fact is, many of us fought valiantly and honorably, only to be let down by American and Afghan leadership.

Two weeks ago, while battling to hold the southern city of Lashkar Gah from the Taliban, President Ashraf Ghani named me commander of Afghanistan's special forces, the country's most elite fighters. I reluctantly left my troops and arrived in Kabul on Aug. 15, ready to fight — unaware how bad the situation already was. Then Mr. Ghani handed me the added task of ensuring the security of Kabul. But I never even had a chance: The Taliban were closing in, and Mr. Ghani fled the country.

There is an enormous sense of betrayal here. Mr. Ghani's hasty escape ended efforts to negotiate an interim agreement for a transition period with the Taliban that would have enabled us to hold the city and help manage evacuations. Instead, chaos ensued — resulting in the desperate scenes witnessed at the Kabul airport.

It was in response to those scenes that Mr. Biden said on Aug. 16 that the Afghan forces collapsed, "sometimes without trying to fight." But we fought, bravely, until the end. We lost 66,000 troops over the past 20 years; that's one-fifth of our estimated fighting force.

So why did the Afghan military collapse? The answer is threefold.

First, former President Donald Trump's February 2020 peace deal with the Taliban in Doha doomed us. It put an expiration date on American interest in the region. Second, we lost contractor logistics and maintenance support critical to our combat operations. Third, the corruption endemic in Mr. Ghani's government that flowed to senior military leadership and long crippled our forces on the ground irreparably hobbled us.

The Trump-Taliban [agreement](#) shaped the circumstances for the current situation by essentially curtailing offensive combat operations for U.S. and allied troops. The U.S. air-support rules of engagement for Afghan security forces effectively changed overnight, and the Taliban were emboldened. They could sense victory and knew it was just a matter of waiting out the Americans. Before that deal, the Taliban had not won any significant battles against the Afghan Army. After the agreement? We were losing dozens of soldiers a day

Still, we kept fighting. But then Mr. Biden confirmed in April he would stick to Mr. Trump's plan and set the terms for the U.S. drawdown. That was when everything started to go downhill.

The Afghan forces were trained by the Americans using the U.S. military model based on highly technical special reconnaissance units, helicopters and airstrikes. We lost our superiority to the Taliban when our air support dried up and our ammunition ran out.

Contractors maintained our bombers and our attack and transport aircraft throughout the war. By July, most of the 17,000 support contractors had left. A technical issue now meant that aircraft — a Black Hawk helicopter, a C-130 transport, a surveillance drone — would be grounded.

The contractors also took proprietary software and weapons systems with them. They physically removed our helicopter missile-defense system. Access to the software that we relied on to track our vehicles, weapons and personnel also disappeared. Real-time intelligence on targets went out the window, too.

The Taliban fought with snipers and improvised explosive devices while we lost aerial and laser-guided weapon capacity. And since we could not resupply bases without helicopter support, soldiers often lacked the necessary tools to fight. The Taliban overran many bases; in other places, entire units surrendered.

Mr. Biden's full and accelerated withdrawal only exacerbated the situation. It ignored conditions on the ground. The Taliban had a firm end date from the Americans and feared no military reprisal for anything they did in the interim, sensing the lack of U.S. will.

And so the Taliban kept ramping up. My soldiers and I endured up to seven Taliban car bombings daily throughout July and the first week of August in Helmand Province. Still, we stood our ground.

I cannot ignore the third factor, though, because there was only so much the Americans could do when it came to the well-documented corruption that rotted our government and military. That really is our national

tragedy. So many of our leaders — including in the military — were installed for their personal ties, not for their credentials. These appointments had a devastating impact on the national army because leaders lacked the military experience to be effective or inspire the confidence and trust of the men being asked to risk their lives. Disruptions to food rations and fuel supplies — a result of skimming and corrupt contract allocations — destroyed the morale of my troops.

The final days of fighting were surreal. We engaged in intense firefights on the ground against the Taliban as U.S. fighter jets circled overhead, effectively spectators. Our sense of abandonment and betrayal was equaled only by the frustration U.S. pilots felt and relayed to us — being forced to witness the ground war, apparently unable to help us. Overwhelmed by Taliban fire, my soldiers would hear the planes and ask why they were not providing air support. Morale was devastated. Across Afghanistan, soldiers stopped fighting. We held Lashkar Gah in fierce battles, but as the rest of the country fell, we lacked the support to continue fighting and retreated to base. My corps, which had carried on even after I was called away to Kabul, was one of the last to give up its arms — only after the capital fell.

We were betrayed by politics and presidents... This was not an Afghan war only; it was an international war, with many militaries involved. It would have been impossible for one army alone, ours, to take up the job and fight. This was a military defeat, but it emanated from political failure.

Understanding the relative balance of all the reasons U.S. and Afghan causes for the collapse is critical if the U.S. is to learn the right lessons of the war as well as learning the truth again requires objective and expert study with fully access to both classified and open source data.

The “Fog” of Collapse and Defeat

What remains unclear at this writing is what kind of government will emerge from the Taliban victory and how functional or dysfunctional that government will be. As has been noted earlier, the previous Afghan government could not fund its own government, security forces, or population without massive aid. It is far from clear than any Taliban government will receive anything like the past levels of aid, and it faces a major Covid-19 crisis and the need to deal with the social, humanitarian, and economic crises caused by the collapse.

As noted earlier, Afghanistan has experienced a massive aid-funded rise in urbanization since 2003 — particularly between 2000 and 2010. There are no reliable estimates of the rate of this urbanization, and the wide range in current estimates in **Figure Twenty- Seven** illustrates this fact. However, all statistical data on Afghanistan’s population are very uncertain — as is almost all the other population dependent statistical data in a country, which has never had a real census or the ability to collect data in many Districts.

This urban growth has been partly driven by natural population growth and by the need for many Afghans to find an alternative to agriculture through creating a meaningful life in small towns, villages, and isolated area. It has also been driven by the search for security and higher incomes — and much of that growth has been shaped in ways that divide cities and larger towns by regional ethnicity, sect, language, and tribe.

The end result still leaves most Afghans in rural areas, where many still live in a near-subsistence agricultural economy where progress in modernization and development has only a limited impact. However, millions now live with a very different economy that is far more modern in economic and social terms and far more dependent on aid and trade. Some 25% or more of Afghanistan’s population is probably now concentrated in such urban areas, and securing them often involves very large areas outside the city proper — and most cities can only function if they have trade, resupply, and transit capabilities

One way or another, the Taliban victory seems certain to change every aspect of these urban areas in ways that no one has planned or yet seems to have considered in talking about a peace settlement. At least so far, the Taliban has tried to push back the populations it comes to control into a mythical past form of Islamic religious life that cannot function politically or compete economically in the modern world.

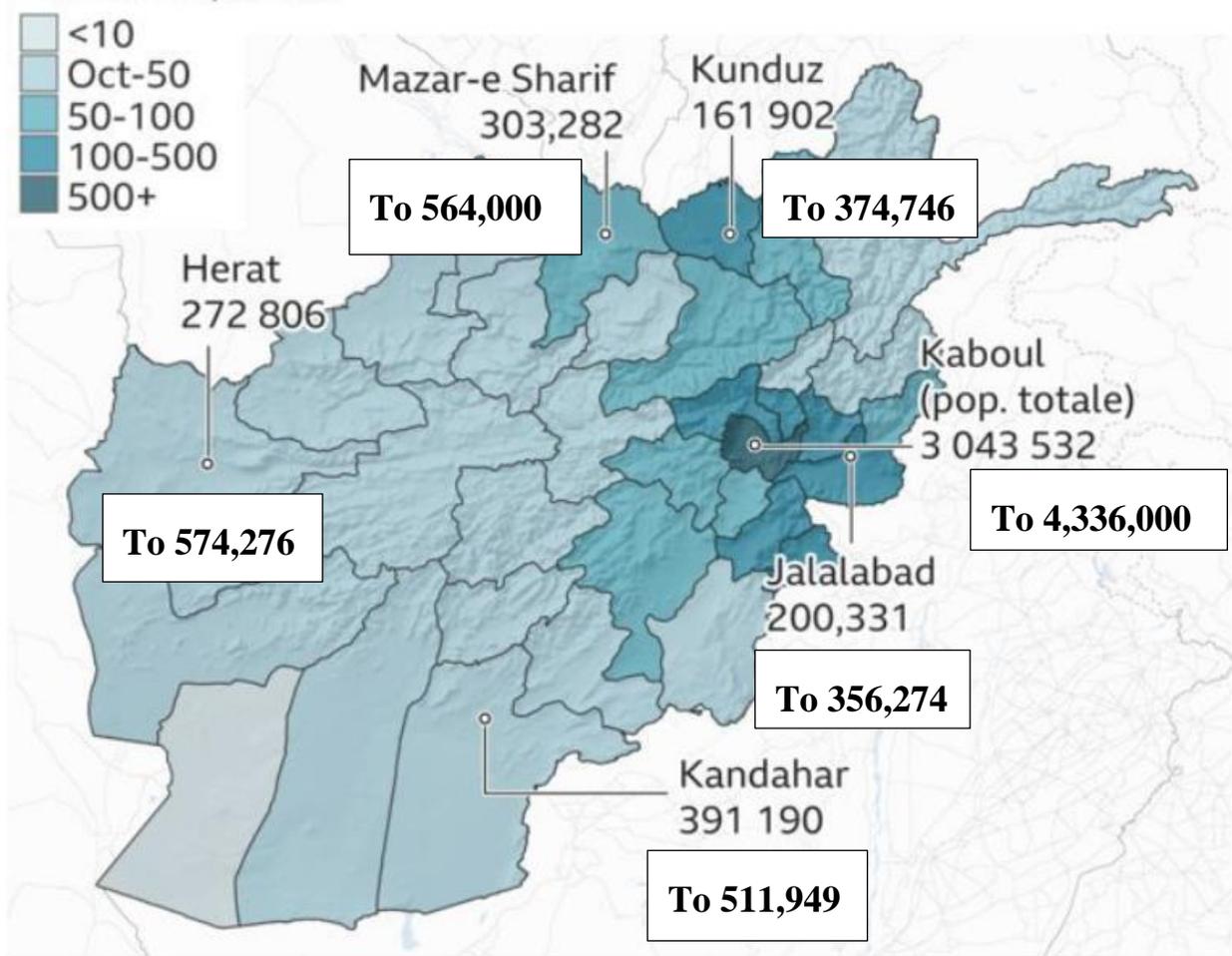
This makes it all too possible that the end result of the collapse of the Afghan central government and U.S. and allied withdrawal will be a pyrrhic victory for a Taliban that cannot create the Afghanistan its ideology demands. Such an outcome, however, is likely to come out of any peace agreement that tries to create a functional basis for cooperation between the Taliban and central government. The war is all too likely to end in an unstable mess for any post conflict government. It also is all too likely to be yet another version of the many other cases in the post war era where “peace” and “conflict resolution” has led to instability, economic decline, and lower civil living standards – often continuing for decades with new authoritarian regimes or new forms of war.

These problems are further complicated by the fact that so much of Afghan’s post 2003 progress has been centered around the central government in “Kabulstan.” The capital has become so important in international terms that it is unclear that any power can control the country without it, but it is equally unclear that any government or faction can survive unless Kabul has access to trade routes, airports, and transit. The main fight for Afghanistan may have begun in the Districts and rural areas, but the war (and any peace) must end in the cities – and no one as of yet seems to have fully considered how this could take place in a workable form.

This raises further questions about the lessons the U.S. should learn from such wars. Success must deal with conflict termination and the future, not just the fighting. How do you allocate aid as well as military and civil power to deal with the aftermath of conflict? Victory is not a matter of who wins given battles, takes the most territory, or controls the most population; it is a matter of creating – or defending – something approaching a viable state. It is far from clear that the U.S., the Taliban, or the Afghan government have ever given this goal the proper weight.

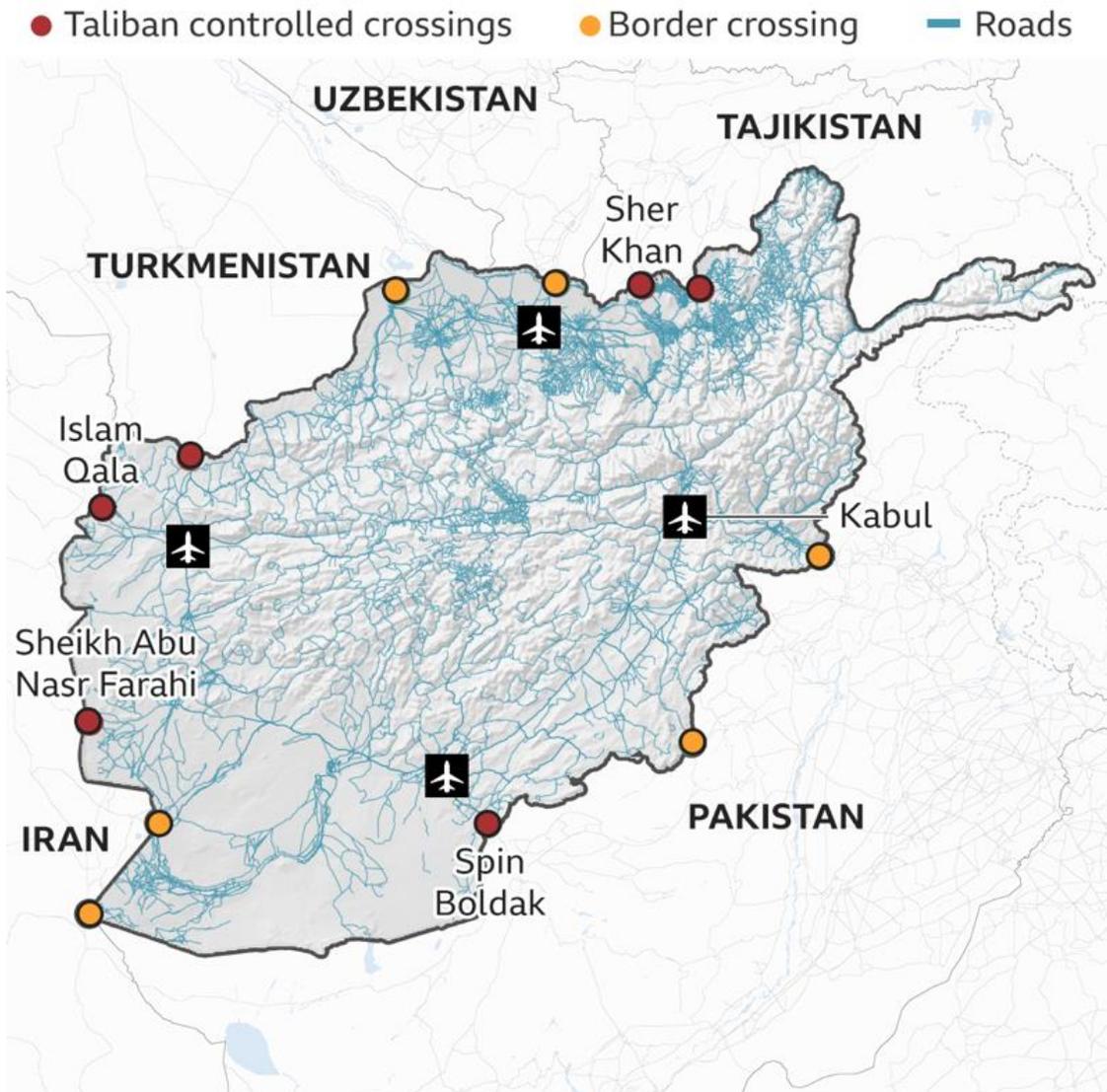
Figure Twenty-Six: Key Afghan Population Centers and Cities

persons per km²



Source: Adapted from "The Advance of the Taliban in Afghanistan," New-in-24, July 29, 2021, <https://new.in-24.com/News/117652.html>.

Figures in boxes are taken from other estimates. The program does not allow the use of commas to show thousands.

Figure Twenty-Seven: Key Afghan Border Posts

Source: BBC research, IOM, 26 July 2021

BBC

Customs duty on goods entering the country via crossings they control is now collected by the Taliban - although exact amounts are unclear as the volume of trade has fallen as a result of the fighting.

But, Islam Qala on the border with Iran was, for example, capable of generating more than \$20m per month.

Disruption to the flow of imports and exports has affected prices of essential goods in the markets - fuel and foodstuffs in particular.

Source: BBC, "Mapping the advance of the Taliban in Afghanistan," The Visual Journalism Team, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57933979>

The Future of the Taliban, and the Prospects for International Terrorism

It is still too early to be certain the Taliban can win decisively enough to govern on its own terms, and ISIS-K has already conducted a major successful terrorist attack that seems directed as much at the Taliban as towards the United States. The Taliban will potentially be very dependent on outside aid and trade and on its relations with neighboring states.

The history of such movements is that more than half of them break-up, change character, or revert to some leader within two years. Most outside analysis has also focused on the Taliban as extremist or a threat, not how it might compromise or govern – an approach that may prove to be all too valid a prophecy of how it will act if it does gain power.

Guessing at the Taliban

The UN Security Council Report issued on May 21, 2021 does provide useful background as to recent developments within the Taliban, and its internal stability:³⁷

While the Taliban's central structure remained largely unaltered during the reporting period, one notable change from within the Office of the Leader of the Faithful (Amir al-Mu'minin) was the appointment in May 2020 of Mullah Mohammad Yaqub Omari to lead the Taliban Military Commission. Mullah Yaqub ranks second in line after first deputy Sirajuddin Haqqani to Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada. Yaqub is the son of the late Taliban founder Mullah Mohammed Omar Ghulam Nabi (TAI.004) and is reported to harbour ambitions to become the group's leader.

The Taliban Leadership Council (Quetta Shura) has continued to pursue a diplomatic policy and military strategy to gain leverage for negotiations and raise the Taliban's international profile. The group has remained outwardly unified despite some reports of internal tensions or divisions. The Quetta Shura controls Taliban affairs in 11 provinces of the south, south-west and west of the country. Another wing, known as the Peshawar Shura, controls 19 provinces. Both Shuras have a presence in Kabul Province and work in tandem. They are also known to exchange fighters on occasion in order to reinforce their respective operations.

The independent operations and power wielded by Taliban field commanders have reportedly been a growing concern to the Leadership Council. As reported by the Monitoring Team in its previous report, tensions between the political leadership and some military commanders, such as Sadr Ibrahim (not listed) and Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir (not listed), reflect ongoing internal rivalries, tribal divisions and disagreements over Taliban revenue distribution...

In February 2021, an order from Akhundzada directed to all Taliban provincial officials instructed Taliban units belonging to commanders outside their own province to report, going forward, only to local shadow provincial governors of the province in which they were operating. The order announced that *mahaz* (splinter groups) were hereby banned and would no longer be recognized. Furthermore, commanders were not to link *dalgai* (units) operating in other provinces together with their own, or issue instructions to them.

Military commanders such as Sadr Ibrahim and Mullah Zakir have effectively built their own forces (*mahaz*), that traditionally operate across several provinces. While these forces have, in some cases, served to bolster larger Taliban operations, they have also on occasion failed to send forces in operations deemed likely to incur high casualties. With Sadr Ibrahim, Mullah Zakir and possibly other commanders proving too powerful and independent, there are leadership concerns that tensions will lead to vying for loyalties of certain groups, particularly in the south and south-west of the country. Given the timing of the order, it appears that the Leadership Council was attempting to ensure that commanders would not break ranks, accommodate local ceasefires, or take any action to contradict leadership guidelines and intent.

Taliban leadership has consistently maintained an outward facing image of unity, while obscuring internal dissent and tensions. Disputes have largely revolved around grievances such as tribal rivalries, allocation of resources, revenues linked to narcotics and the autonomy of individual commanders. While unity within the movement remains strong, it has required more internal effort to enforce cohesion.

Prior to the launch of a new fighting season, the Taliban have regularly shuffled provincial shadow governors and military commanders. Reporting from January and March 2021, following offensives against Helmand and Kandahar in late 2020, revealed several new appointments in preparation for the 2021 fighting season. In January, the Taliban appointed Mullah Daoud Muzammil (not listed) as shadow governor for Kandahar Province. Former shadow governor for Helmand, Mullah Mohammadzai Baloch (not listed) was appointed shadow governor of Zabul Province, and former shadow governor of Kandahar Province, Mullah Hajji Yousaf Amin (not listed) became shadow governor for Helmand.

Leadership changes in January were followed by further reshuffling in early March of shadow government and military commanders in southern Afghanistan. These reportedly included the appointment of Mullah Ibrahim (alias Akhund Shahib) (not listed) as shadow governor for Zabul, Mawlawi Talib (not listed) and Mullah Mubarak (not listed) as shadow governor and military commander for Helmand, and Mullah Mehrullah Hamad (not listed) and Mullah Zarqavi (not listed) as shadow governor and military commander for Kandahar. Similar appointments were made in Farah, Faryab, Ghazni, Ghor, Herat, Jawzjan, Maidan Wardak, and in the eastern, north-eastern and south-eastern regions.

On 23 January 2021, the Taliban announced the death of Abdulhai Motmaen (TAi.051) due to a prolonged illness. Motmaen had been a member of the Taliban Supreme Council and had acted as spokesperson for Mullah Mohammed Omar.

In February 2021, negotiations were reported between Taliban loyal to Haibatullah Akhundzada and members of the Mullah Rasul Taliban splinter group (also known as the High Council of the Afghanistan Islamic Emirate) led by Mullah Niazi (not listed). Discussions resulted in at least three Rasul Taliban faction commanders rejoining the mainstream Taliban body. All three were stated to be relatives of the deceased Rasul faction commander, Mullah Nangalai. Local interlocutors credited the defections to internal disagreements combined with a calculated decision for realignment that was forward looking.

... Estimates of the current number of armed Taliban fighters range from approximately 58,000 to 100,000, with numbers fluctuating as forces are actively deployed on the battlefield or placed in reserve. Taliban numbers remain robust in spite of significant attrition rates incurred in the past few years.

Within the Taliban structure, the Haqqani Network remains the Taliban's most combat-ready forces, under the leadership of Sirajuddin Haqqani, first deputy to Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada. The Haqqani Network, though integrated into the Taliban, retains semi-autonomous status while still reporting directly to the Taliban Supreme Council.

The Haqqani Network is reported to have a highly skilled core of members who specialize in complex attacks and provide technical skills, such as improvised explosive device and rocket construction. A wider force of between 3,000 to 10,000 traditional armed fighters operate in the so-called "P2K" region of Khost, Paktika and Paktiya Provinces. The Haqqani Network remains a hub for outreach and cooperation with regional foreign terrorist groups and is the primary liaison between the Taliban and Al-Qaida.

The problem with any such analysis, however, is the sheer scale of rapid Taliban gains in mid-2021, the changing role of key fighters, the scale of changes in top leadership cadres that may take place as the Taliban shifts to governance, and the role that neighboring powers like China and Russia may come to play over time. The end result may well be years of instability, compounded

by an ideology that will find it difficult to compromise and take the pragmatic attitudes necessary to move towards stability and sustained development.

The Impact of al-Qaeda and ISIS-K

There are other key lessons to be learned from how the war ends. One of the key stated strategic goals of the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan was to prevent Afghanistan from becoming the center of terrorist threats outside the region. Here, however, exists no practical way to estimate whether the rise of the Taliban will present a serious new threat from international terrorism to targets as far away as the United States or even to its immediate neighbors.

There are some indications that the Taliban's gains have strengthened the links between the Taliban and Islamist movements in the region, and UN and other reporting, by sources like the *Long War Journal*, make it clear that the Taliban still has links to al-Qaeda. The same UN Security Council Report quoted earlier notes that the ties between the Taliban and al-Qaeda continue, that al-Qaeda may gain from the Taliban's victories, and that ISIS still presents at least some form of a threat:

A significant part of the leadership of Al-Qaida (QDe.004) resides in the Afghanistan and Pakistan border region, alongside Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent. Large numbers of Al-Qaida fighters and other foreign extremist elements aligned with the Taliban are located in various parts of Afghanistan. Al-Qaida continued to suffer attrition during the period under review, with a number of senior figures killed, often alongside Taliban associates while co-located with them. The primary component of the Taliban in dealing with Al-Qaida is the Haqqani Network (TAe.012). Ties between the two groups remain close, based on ideological alignment, relationships forged through common struggle and intermarriage.

...The Taliban has begun to tighten its control over Al-Qaida by gathering information on foreign terrorist fighters and registering and restricting them. However, it has not made any concessions in this regard that it could not easily and quickly reverse, and it is impossible to assess with confidence that the Taliban will live up to its commitment to suppress any future international threat emanating from Al-Qaida in Afghanistan. Al-Qaida and like-minded militants continue to celebrate developments in Afghanistan as a victory for the Taliban's cause and thus for global radicalism.

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan (ISIL-K) (QDe.161) remains diminished from its zenith, following successive military setbacks that began in Jowzjan in summer 2018. However, since June 2020, it has had an ambitious new leader, Shahab al-Muhajir (not listed), and it remains active and dangerous, particularly if it is able, by positioning itself as the sole pure rejectionist group in Afghanistan, to recruit disaffected Taliban and other militants to swell its ranks. Member States have varying assessments of the extent of ISIL-K and al-Muhajir's links with the Haqqani Network. Meanwhile, the Al-Sadiq office is co-located with ISIL-K in Afghanistan, pursuing a regional agenda in Central and South Asia on behalf of the ISIL core.

As reported by the Monitoring Team in its eleventh report, the Taliban and Al-Qaida remain closely aligned and show no indication of breaking ties. Member States report no material change to this relationship, which has grown deeper as a consequence of personal bonds of marriage and shared partnership in struggle, now cemented through second generational ties.

While the Doha agreement has set some expectations for a break in the long-standing relationship between the Taliban and Al-Qaida, the publicly available text of the agreement does not define expectations, and its annexes remain secret.

...led by Al-Qaida's Jabhat-al-Nasr wing under the direction of Sheikh Mahmood (not listed). Members of the group have been relocated to more remote areas by the Taliban to avoid potential exposure and targeting. According to Member States, Al-Qaida maintains contact with the Taliban but has minimized overt communications with Taliban leadership in an effort to "lay low" and not jeopardize the Taliban's diplomatic position vis-à-vis the Doha agreement.

Member States reported that a significant part of Al-Qaida leadership remains based in the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the core is joined by and works closely with Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent.

Al-Qaida's own strategy in the near term is assessed as maintaining its traditional safe haven in Afghanistan for the Al-Qaida core leadership. The Monitoring Team takes note of assessments that have suggested a longer-term Al-Qaida core strategy of strategic patience for a period of time before it would seek to plan attacks against international targets again. This scenario is untested against stated Taliban commitments to prohibit such activities.

Al-Qaida, including Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, is reported to number in the range of several dozen to 500 persons. Al-Qaida core's membership is of non-Afghan origin, consisting mainly of nationals from North Africa and the Middle East. Although, as noted above, Member States assess that formal communication between senior Al-Qaida and Taliban officials is currently infrequent, one Member State reported that there is regular communication between the Taliban and Al-Qaida on issues related to the peace process. The group's leader, Aiman Muhammed Rabi al-Zawahiri (QDi.006), is believed to be located somewhere in the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Previous reports of his death due to ill health have not been confirmed. One Member State reports that he is probably alive but too frail to be featured in propaganda. Another Egyptian national, Husam Abd Al-Rauf (alias Abu Mohsin al-Masri) was killed on 20 October 2020 in Andar district of Ghazni Province. Al-Rauf was thought to be both an Al-Qaida Shura Council member and its chief financier.

Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent operates under the Taliban umbrella from Kandahar, Helmand (notably Baramcha) and Nimruz Provinces. The group reportedly consists of primarily Afghan and Pakistani nationals, but also individuals from Bangladesh, India and Myanmar. Its current leader is Osama Mahmood (not listed), who succeeded the late Asim Umar (not listed). The group is reported to be such an "organic" or essential part of the insurgency that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to separate it from its Taliban allies. Several Member States characterized this relationship by noting that the wife of the former leader of Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent, Asim Umar... was among 5,000 Taliban prisoners freed by the Afghan Government in 2020 as part of the Doha agreement.

The killing of several Al-Qaida commanders in Taliban-controlled territory underscores the closeness of the two groups. Following the death of al-Rauf in October, the Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent deputy, Mohammad Hanif (alias Abdullah), was killed on 10 November 2020 in Bakwa District of Farah Province. According to a Member State, he had been providing bomb-making training to Taliban insurgents in that location. Both individuals appear to have been given shelter and protection by the Taliban. On 30 March 2021, Afghan Forces led a raid in Gyan District of Paktika Province that killed a prominent Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent commander, Dawlat Bek Tajiki (alias Abu Mohammad al-Tajiki), alongside Hazrat Ali, a Taliban commander from Waziristan.

Al-Qaida's presence in Afghanistan has also been confirmed by its own affiliated propaganda and media wings. Al-Qaida's weekly *Thabat* newsletter reported on Al-Qaida operations inside Afghanistan, listing Al-Qaida attacks since 2020 in 18 provinces.

In May 2020, Al-Qaida in the Indian Subcontinent released an Eid al-Fitr audio message in which it portrayed the Doha agreement as an example of divine victory and reward for pursuing jihad. While both organizations are expected to maintain a posture of distance and discretion for as long as such is required for the achievement of Taliban objectives, Al-Qaida nonetheless stands to benefit from renewed credibility on the back of Taliban gains. It will be important for the international community to monitor any sign of Afghanistan again becoming a destination for extremists with both regional and international agendas.

Once again, no one can deny the risk that the Taliban will come under leaders focused on exporting the Taliban's ideology through violent acts or that it will tolerate and host an al-Qaeda or similar threat hostile to Muslim states where it operates. The Taliban may also struggle to contain the threat from ISIS and virtually every other violent Islamic movement. Attacks on the U.S., European targets, and other non-Muslim states do happen and are real, but the numbers are marginal compared to the levels of violence in Muslim states from most such movements –

including the Taliban that was concentrated on winning and consolidating power in their own country.

Even al-Qaeda, however, seems far more concerned with taking power in largely Muslim states and areas than striking at the U.S., Europe, or other more distant targets, and it is important to remember that 9/11 was not part of some broad or coherent effort, but a remarkably successful and well-focused attack by a fairly small faction. Key threats from terrorism may not be the result of some broad effort to create centers for training and operations, but the result of skill, actions by small groups of actors, or sheer luck. Attacks can come from any form of extremist movements anywhere in the world, as well as be more domestic than international.

Accordingly, the primary threat that a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan will pose in international terms – if any – may well be to the regimes of largely Muslim states. Its focus will be largely local, and most longer range attacks will continue to come with little warning from small elements in virtually all of the countries where there now are such violent extremist movement or from within small domestic cadres in non-Muslim states that have ties to such movements.

Moreover, any war against “terrorism” that continues to target such threats, using airpower or ground troops and that also ignores the causes of instability and extremism in the states involved, will continue to treat the symptoms and not the disease.

Properly Assessing the Cost of the War in Blood

Cost is another key aspect of the lessons of both the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts, and one that urgently requires detailed and objective official analysis. All of the issues that shaped the course of the war shaped its cost to the Afghan people, the U.S., and its allies. These costs are as critical measures of success and failure as any other, they provide powerful lessons for future wars and strongly indicate that new approaches that need to be taken to both the laws of war and managing civilian and military assistance.

Such analysis must also look far beyond U.S. losses. It is striking that there are no official U.S. estimates of the total costs in blood and dollars of the war in civil and military aid to America's allies or of Afghan casualties and refugees, and there are no credible estimates of such losses that emerged from a simple Internet search. It is yet another example of the American strategic jingoism described in the following section of this analysis.

Measuring the Costs in Blood: Military Casualties

There are reliable estimates of U.S. military killed and largely reliable estimates of U.S. military injured and wounded. Some allied countries report their military casualties, but there are no reliable estimates for total allied casualties.

There also are no reliable U.S. or other estimates of Afghan total casualties in the Afghan government and security forces, in Taliban and other hostile forces, or governmental personnel and contractors. There are, however, some interesting efforts to make broad estimates based on open source data. 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. Other Afghan reporting after the collapse of Afghan forces in July-August 2021 in cites resulted in 60,000 dead.

A more detailed open source estimated by the Cost of War project at the Watson Institute at Brown University provides the full break of casualties and is estimated that deaths in the Afghan national military and police were higher 66,000-69,000 between October 2001 and the beginning of the collapse of the ANDSF in August 2021.³⁸ These estimates, however, are very uncertain and do not seem to include many local security forces.

The only detailed military casualty estimates that seem to be truly reliable – and that are broadly quoted in U.S. reporting – are the estimates of U.S. military casualties. 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.

Here, however, focusing on the total casualties during the entire war – or on very small numbers of recent U.S. casualties – illustrate the need to carefully examine how these casualties rose and fell as the U.S. first escalated its troop levels and the level of conflict only to then cut back sharply on its ground forces and then prolong the war by relying on airpower and limited cadres of train and assist personnel.

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.

Measuring the Costs in Blood: Civilian Casualties

There also are no reliable U.S., UN, or other estimates of Afghan civilian casualties and refugees. Many estimates also used different methodologies and sources over time, and they are not comparable or capable of producing credible totals for the entire war. These include UN, U.S. and ISAF estimates.

The Watson Institute at Brown University is one of the few sources that made a serious attempt to use open source data to report the full range of all major types of casualties for the entire war. As **Figure Twenty-Eight** shows, the Watson Institute estimated in April 2021, 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, but this was more a skilled and broadly credible “guesstimate” based on open sources than accounting based on access to official and classified data.³⁹

Like all such estimates, the Watson Institute had to draw upon sources where the level of confirmation was uncertain and where it often was impossible for the original source to accurately count injuries, know how many died later from injuries, and sort out which side was correct in accusing the other of exaggerating the civilian casualties it inflicted and understate its own casualties.

Official open source estimates by UNAMA, the U.S., ISAF and Resolute Support are more limited and were affected to some extent by a propaganda battle over casualties that was skillfully conducted by the Taliban and was particularly effective in creating a controversy over estimates of the number of killed and injured/wounded inflicted by air strikes. It became a battle where the Taliban often did its best to exaggerate such casualties for propaganda purposes, and Resolute Support sometimes seemed to deliberately undercount them.

At the same time, no source attempted to count casualties and injuries inflicted by the Taliban on civilians as part of its efforts to intimidate, extort, and control the civil population, justice system, and government officials in the country side – efforts that are known to have been violent and involved extensive casualties, but ones that were not inflicted in what was normally counted as “combat.”

The most detailed official estimates came from UNAMA, which issued detailed quarterly and annual reports from 2009 onwards, and estimated the annual totals by major category from 2009 through the end of 2020 shown in **Figure Twenty-Nine**. SIGAR reports that UNAMA also issued an estimate in the second quarter of 2021 that a total of 38,553 Afghans died and 72,311 were injured between the start of its estimates in 2009 through 2021.

UNAMA also provided broadly useful, if sometimes uncertain or controversial detailed estimates of the source and cause of casualties as well as the relative responsibility of pro-Afghan government, Taliban, and other hostile forces.⁴⁰ Resolute Support issued its own – often contradictory – estimates, and SIGAR provided regular snapshots of such estimates of Afghan civilian casualties in its reporting, as well as comparisons of UN and U.S./Resolute Support (RS) estimates. These analyses, however, clearly showed the limits to such estimates. For example, SIGAR provided the RS estimates shown in **Figure Thirty** in its second quarterly report to Congress for 2021 which are clearly different from the UNAMA estimates. It also states that,⁴¹

Civilian casualties continued to rise this quarter, including deadly urban attacks. In one of the worst incidents, on May 8, 2021, a car-bomb exploded along with two other blasts, killing 85 and wounding 275 students at Sayed-ul-Shuhada High School, a predominantly Shia girls school in Kabul. While no group claimed responsibility—the Taliban disavowed any involvement—U.S. officials believe that IS-K carried out the attack.

RS reported 2,035 civilian casualties in April and May 2021, which included 705 deaths and 1,330 injuries. This total is nearly as high as the three months from January through March 2021 (2,149). According to RS, the top two causes of civilian casualties were improvised explosive devices and direct fire (e.g., rifle or machine-gun fire) these civilian casualties were nearly as high as the entire three month period last year (April–June 2020).

RS attributed about 93% of this quarter’s civilian casualties to antigovernment forces (40% to the Taliban, 38% to unknown insurgents, 14% to IS-K, and less than 1% to the Haqqani Network. About 2% were attributed to progovernment forces (2% to ANDSF), and about 5% to other or unknown forces. These percentages are roughly similar to long term trends reported by RS.

Studying the Political-Military Impact of Casualties and Their Impact on the Laws of War

Learning from this numbers game is important in terms of the political dimension of warfare and from the practical and legal dimensions. For example, it had a major impact on the ability to use air and missile power to strike given Taliban and ISIS-K targets because the possible civilian casualties and collateral damage that such strikes could inflict if conducted in a civilian area. This allowed the Taliban exploit civilian populations and areas as the equivalent of human shields, and it meant the U.S. had to conduct a massive intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance effort to track Taliban leaders and forces as they moved outside of civilian areas or were clearly isolated from most civilians.

Limiting such losses was critical in winning popular support in any case, but it set a precedent that may be impossible to follow in the future – particularly if forces must react quickly or operate in an environment where the U.S. cannot deploy sufficient intelligence and target assets. It makes the “laws of war” a political weapon in insurgent and popular warfare, and it tends to penalize the side using regular military and security forces while given considerable protection or added from of action to the terrorist or insurgent group – as well as ignoring the fact that the rapid and effective use of force may terminate the conflict more quickly and actually reduce the total level of ultimate casualties.

This does not exempt the U.S. or any other power from the need to minimize civilian casualties, refugees and IDPs, and collateral damage. It does, however, strongly indicate that the U.S. needed to learn as many lessons as possible about the extent to which it can adapt its forces to deal with terrorists, insurgents, and other forms of warfare in the future. It also indicates the need to carefully review the laws of war to focus on reducing the total level of civilian casualties and damage over time, rather than on a strike-by-strike or battle-by-battle basis.

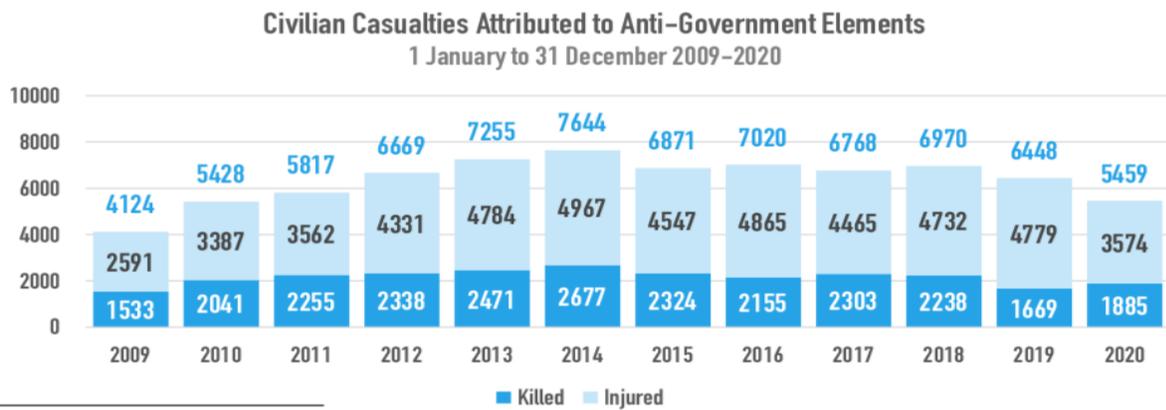
Figure Twenty-Eight: Watson Institute Estimate of the Cost in Blood of the Afghan War

ESTIMATED DIRECT WAR DEATHS IN AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN (OCTOBER 2001-APRIL 2021)²			
	Afghanistan	Pakistan	Total
US Military ³	2,442 ⁴	— ⁵	2,442
US DOD Civilian ⁶	6		6
US Contractors ⁷	3,846	90	3,936
National Military and Police ⁸	66,000-69,000 ⁹	9,314 ¹⁰	75,314-78,314
Other Allied Troops ¹¹	1,144	—	1,144
Civilians	47,245 ¹²	24,099 ¹³	71,344
Opposition Fighters	51,191 ¹⁴	33,000 ¹⁵	84,191
Journalists and Media Workers ¹⁶	72	64	136
Humanitarian Aid Workers ¹⁷	444	105	549
TOTAL	171,336-174,336	66,714	238,050-241,050
TOTAL ROUNDED	171,000-174,000	67,000	238,000-241,000

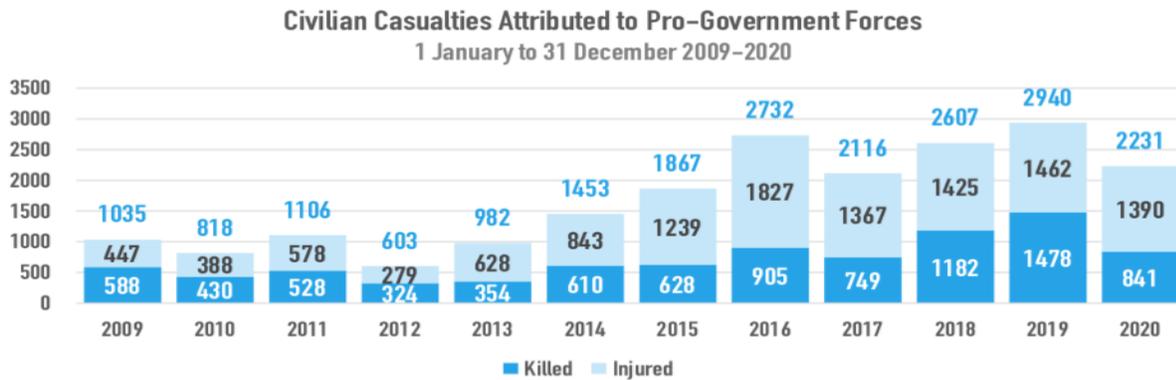
Note: The Costs of War Project also estimates that 241,000 people have died as a direct result of this war. These figures do *not* include deaths caused by disease, loss of access to food, water, infrastructure, and/or other indirect consequences of the war.

Source: Cost of War Project, Watson Institute, Brown University, August 2021, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022>. Accessed August 30, 2021

Figure Twenty-Nine: UNAMA Reporting on Civilian Casualties by Quarter



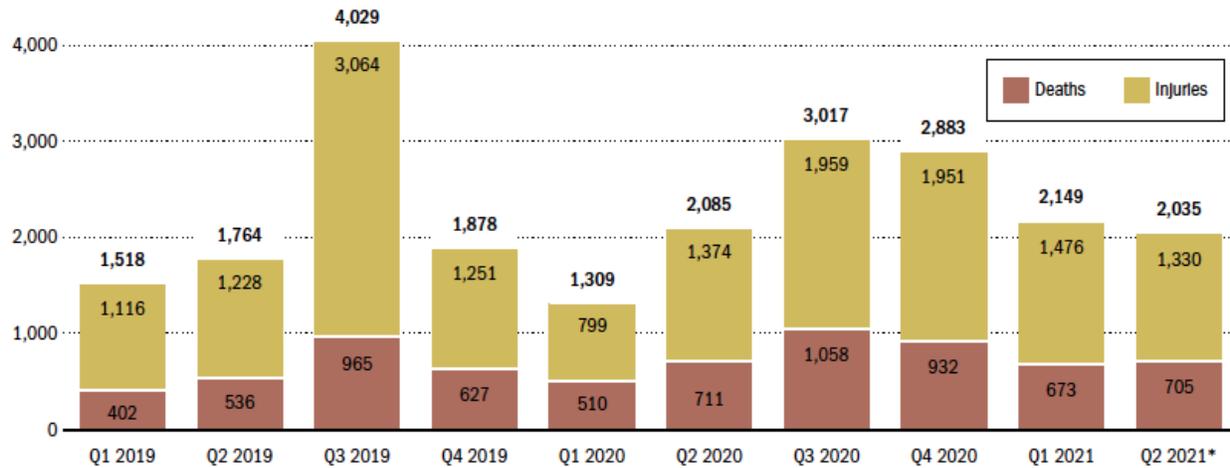
⁸² From 1 January to 31 December 2019, UNAMA attributed 6,448 civilian casualties (1,669 killed and 4,779 injured) to Anti-Government Elements.
⁸³ In 2020, UNAMA documented 1,538 incidents in which Anti-Government Elements caused civilian casualties, in comparison to 1,439 such incidents in 2019.



¹⁵⁶ In 2019, UNAMA attributed 2,940 civilian casualties (1,478 and 1,462 injured) to Pro-Government Forces.
¹⁵⁷ In 2020, UNAMA documented 1,085 civilian casualties (299 killed and 786 injured) from the use of indirect fire during ground engagements by Pro-Government Forces and 693 civilian casualties (341 killed and 352 injured) to airstrikes from Pro-Government Forces.

Source: UNAMA, *Afghanistan, Protection of Civilian in Armed Conflict*, February 2021, p. 1, <https://unama.unmissions.org/civilian-casualties-set-hit-unprecedented-highs-2021-unless-urgent-action-stem-violence-un-report>; and <https://unama.unmissions.org/civilian-casualties-set-hit-unprecedented-highs-2021-unless-urgent-action-stem-violence-un-report>.

Figure Thirty: Resolute Support (RS) Reporting on Civilian Casualties by Quarter



*Q2 2021 data includes ONLY April 1–May 31, 2021.
 Note: Figures for last quarter have been updated by RS this quarter.
 Source: RS, response to SIGAR data call, 1/7/2020, 10/7/2019, 1/6/2021, 4/6/2021, and 6/16/2021; SIGAR, analysis of RS-provided data, 7/2021.

The Uncertain Human Cost of Refugee and IDP Status

Most official and NGO estimates of humanitarian problems throughout the war raised valid humanitarian concerns. Some of these estimates may also be approximately correct – *but* many were little more than guesstimates and some were inflated to support fundraising and humanitarian estimates. The numbers often differed sharply from source to source, the sources of the data are often not stated, the methodologies for collection and its limitations are unclear, and estimates by category or cause of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) often disguised major differences in the quality of the data.

The end result of leaving refugee and IDP status is unclear, and there seems to be no counts of those who died or were seriously injured while being refugees and IDPs. In many cases, the end result was poverty or destitution after leaving such status, and many must have died, become seriously ill, or been badly injured while in such status.

Properly Assessing the Cost of the War in in Dollars

The need for analysis of the lessons from the changing dollar cost of the war is equally important. At present, there are no reliable estimates of the dollar cost of total civil and military activity as well as aid to Afghanistan from all donors from 2001 onwards, although SIGAR reports that the ten top foreign donor countries of aid did spend at least 26.8 billion on civil and military aid between 2001 and 2021.⁴²

It is critical here to note that the U.S. government has never been able to agree on stable and reliable ways to estimate the direct dollar costs of the war, and its official Cost of War took years to develop, has many gaps and uncertainties, and has never been broadly circulated. There are, however, some good indicators of the overall trends in spending. **Figure Thirty-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 Thirty-Two** shows President Biden's request for future funding in his FY2022 budget request.

These U.S. estimates of direct annual dollar costs do, however, involve major uncertainties as to whether the Veteran's Administration (VA) and other longer-term costs should be included, as to the accounting methods, and as to the way in which unrelated baseline and other costs outside Afghanistan should be allocated. The Costs of War project at the Watson Institute at Brown University has created a very different cost model that shows it is possible to make far higher cost estimates using different methodologies, and SIGAR noted this in its recent official reporting,⁴³

The Costs of War Project sponsored by the Watson Institute at Brown University recently issued U.S. Costs to Date for the War in Afghanistan, 2001–2021, putting total costs at \$2.26 trillion. The Watson Institute's independently produced report builds on DOD's \$933 billion Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) budgets and State's \$59 billion OCO budgets for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Unlike the DOD Cost of War Report, the Watson report adds what it considers to be Afghanistan related costs of \$433 billion above DOD baseline costs, \$296 billion in medical and disability costs for veterans, and \$530 billion in interest costs on related Treasury borrowing. SIGAR takes no position on the reasonableness on the Watson report's assumptions or the accuracy of its calculations."

A pre-collapse estimate of the full cost of the Afghan War by the Watson Institute is summarized in **Figure Thirty-Four**, and it highlights the need to examine the way in which costs are estimated as well as the current cost models used in calculating in **Figures Thirty-one to Thirty-Three**.

At the same time, the data in all these figures strongly indicate 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, and if it only spent aid money on the civil projects and programs that Afghanistan actually wanted and could actually absorb and properly implement.

Far too many recent assessments of the cost of the war to the U.S. have focused on its total cost from 2001 to the present, and not on the radical shifts in annual costs reflected in **Figures Thirty-One to Thirty-Three** – which show 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.

While SIGAR, the LIG, and the Government Accountability Office (GAO) have analyzed some individual aspects of spending, there has been no broad historical review of the patterns of

spending on given types of U.S. forces or on the unstable levels of aid spending shown in **Figure Two**. While most military analysts note the shifts in producing and relying on Afghan ground troops, reducing U.S. and allied ground troops, and expanding the use of airpower and train and assist efforts like the Security Force Assistance Brigades which produced a far cheaper – and more effective – approach to war, the savings in cost and casualties have only had limited analysis at best.

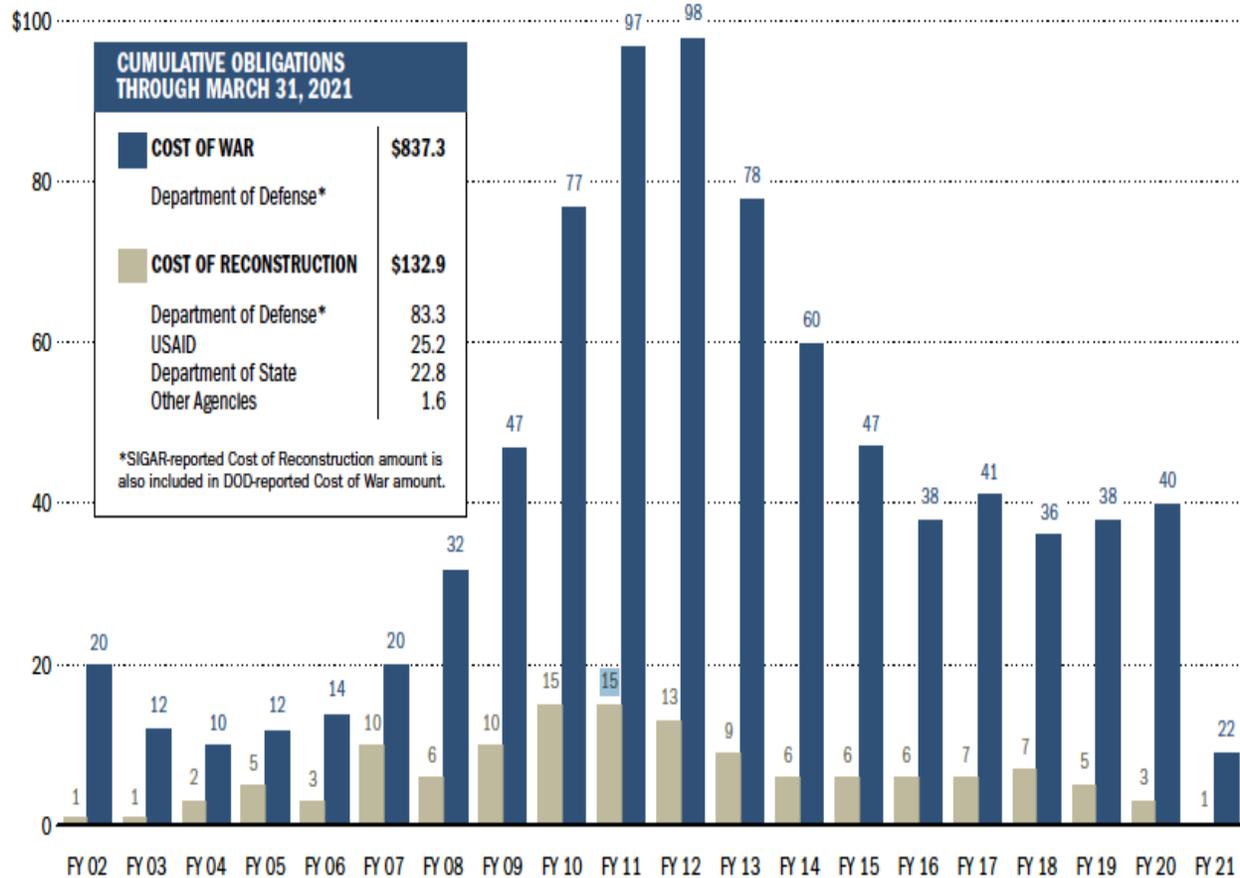
Analysts have addressed the cost of military and civil aid, and some have addressed the impact of waste and corruption. Far too many of the individual programs and projects in **Figure Two**, however, were poorly planned, poorly chosen, poorly managed, and poorly executed. Good intentions are no substitute for competence or – as has already been discussed in detail – adequate conditionality and fiscal management systems.

One key potential lesson of the war's decisions is 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. It should address the adequacy of fiscal management systems and reporting on effectiveness. It should not ignore key issues like the real-world lifecycle costs of transferring military equipment that the ANDSF cannot operate, relying on contractors, or providing civil programs and project aid when the country is not implementing effective economic development plans. Cost-benefit analysis is a critical factor in modern warfighting, and assuming that war justifies rushing plans and spending is yet another recipe for strategic failure.

Another cost-related potential lesson 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.

The sharp declines in the cost of both the Afghan and Iraqi conflicts shown in **Figures Thirty-One, Thirty-Two, and Thirty-Three** illustrate this point all too clearly. One can only speculate as to how much cheaper both wars would have been if the U.S. had focused on building up local forces “their way” from the start, rather than surging in its own forces and trying to build-up local forces “our way” with equipment and tactics they were not capable of rapidly adopting. The cost benefits of the later shift to allied force, U.S. and allied train and assist, and carefully targeted uses of air power are all too clear.

Figure Thirty-One: The Cost of the War through December 31, 2020 and Projected Budget Through FY2021 Q2 in \$US Billions

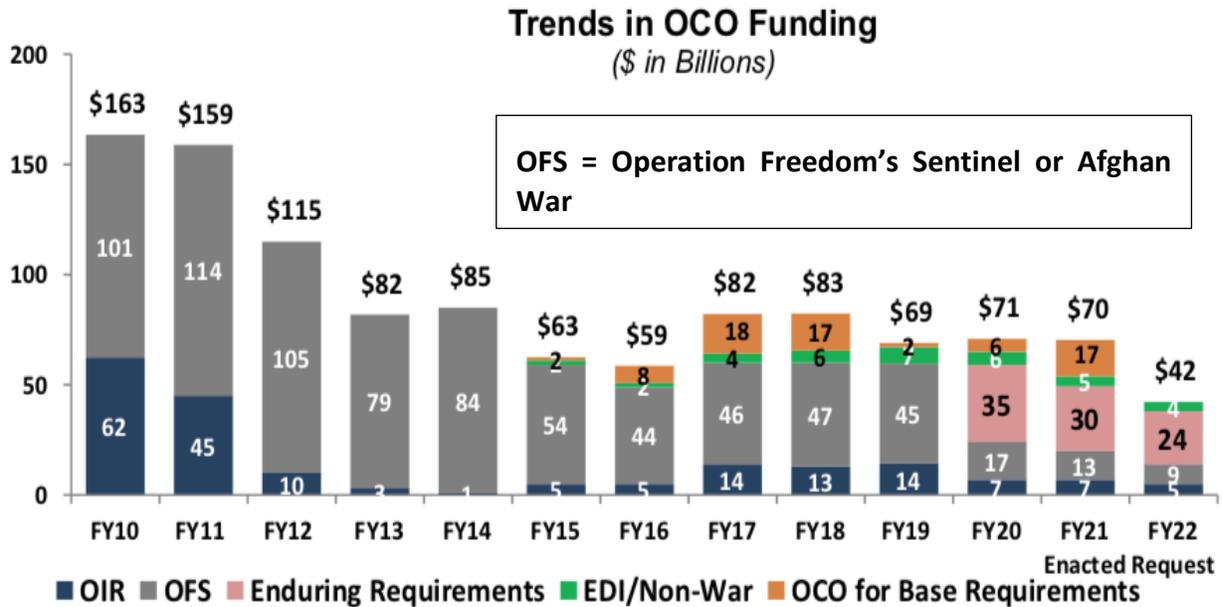


Note: Numbers have been rounded. Cumulative obligations reported by DOD for the Cost of War through March 31, 2021, differ markedly from cumulative appropriations through June 30, 2021, as presented elsewhere in the Status of Funds section, because the former figures do not include unobligated appropriations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

Source: DOD, Cost of War Monthly Report, Total War-related Obligations by Year Incurred, data as of March 31, 2021. Obligation data shown against year funds obligated. SIGAR analysis of annual obligation of reconstruction accounts as presented in SIGAR, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 4/30/2021. Obligation data shown against year funds appropriated.

Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, p. 28-29.

Figure Thirty-Two: OCO Cost of the Afghan War in Terms of Budget Obligations from FY2010 to FY2022 in Current \$U.S. Billions

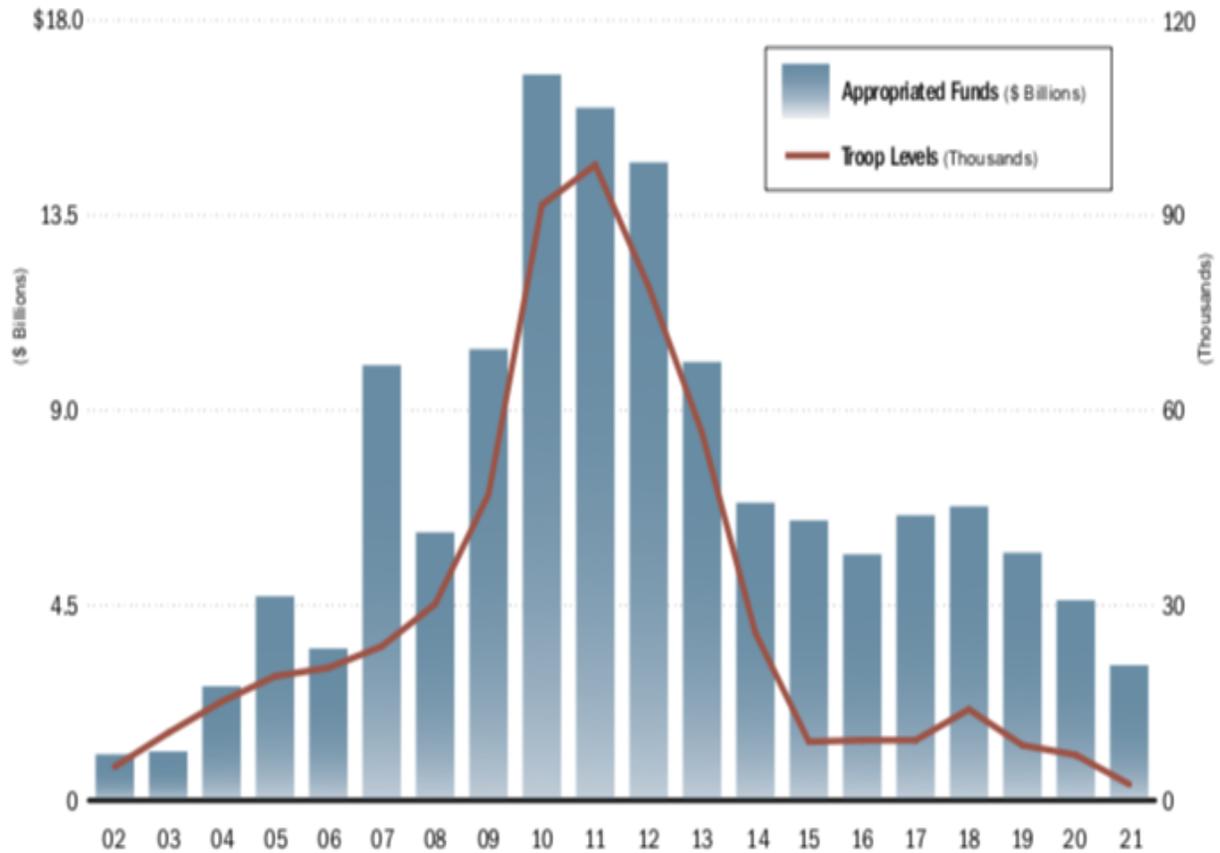


Trends in U.S. Funding of Afghan Forces: FY2020-FY2022

	FY 2020 Appropriated ^a	FY 2021 Appropriated ^b	FY 2022 Request
Budget Activity 6, Afghan National Army (ANA)			
Sustainment	1,132,526	963,565	1,053,668
Infrastructure	37,911	221	1,818
Equipment and Transportation	52,878	4,698	22,911
Training and Operations	33,862	25,663	31,837
Total Afghan National Army	\$1,257,178	\$994,147	\$1,110,234
Budget Activity 7, Afghan National Police (ANP)			
Sustainment	384,398	392,890	440,628
Infrastructure	6,135	448	0
Equipment and Transportation	13,440	28,028	38,551
Training and Operations	35,274	26,924	38,152
Total Afghan National Police	\$439,248	\$448,380	\$517,331
Budget Activity 8, Afghan Air Force (AAF)			
Sustainment	555,856	537,764	562,056
Infrastructure	3,439	--	0
Equipment and Transportation	56,275	45,983	26,600
Training and Operations	373,253	234,304	169,684
Total Afghan Air Force	\$988,825	\$818,051	\$758,340
Budget Activity 9, Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF)			
Sustainment	305,677	597,904	685,176
Infrastructure	9,914	1,532	0
Equipment and Transportation	71,981	18,688	78,982
Training and Operations	27,153	168,909	177,767
Total Afghan Special Security Forces	\$414,726	\$787,033	\$941,925
Total Afghan National Defense and Security Forces	\$3,099,978	\$3,047,612	\$3,327,830

Source: OSD Comptroller, FY2022 Budget Justification Data, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2022/FY2022_ASFF_Justification_Book.pdf.

Figure Thirty-Three: U.S. Appropriations and U.S. Troop Levels in Afghanistan by Fiscal Year: 2002-2021

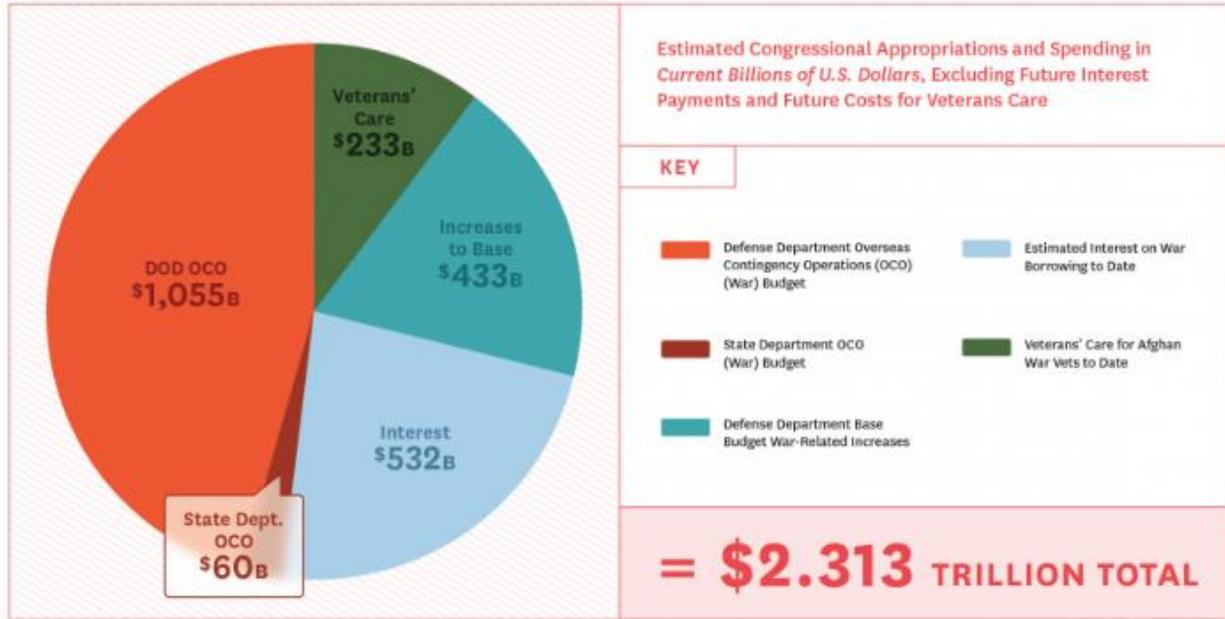


Note: Data from FY 2002 through FY 2007 are annual data, while data from FY 2008 through FY 2017 are averaged quarterly data. Data from FY 2002 through 2017 come from Congressional Research Service reports. Data from FY 2018 and FY 2019 come from the Brookings Institution, as no U.S. government data on U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan are publicly available for this period. Data from FY 2020 and FY 2021 come from public statements made by U.S. officials.

Source: SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, October 30, 2014, pp. 226–227; SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, January 30, 2021, pp. 172–173; U.S. Congressional Research Service, “Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001–FY2012: Costs and Other Potential Issues,” R40682, July 2, 2009, p. 9; U.S. Congressional Research Service, “Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007–2020,” R44116, updated February 22, 2021, pp. 7–8, 13–14; The Brookings Institution, “Afghanistan Index: Tracking variables of reconstruction and security in post-9/11 Afghanistan,” August 2020, p. 5; Elizabeth McLaughlin, “Trump says ‘it is time’ for US troops to exit Afghanistan, undermining Taliban deal,” *ABC News*, May 27, 2020; White House, “Statement by Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller on Force Levels in Afghanistan,” January 15, 2021.

Source: SIGAR, *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghan Reconstruction*, August 2021, p. 17, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>.

Figure Thirty-Four: Watson Institute Estimate of the Costs of War in Afghanistan to Date in \$US billion FY2001-FY2020 as of August 2021



UNITED STATES COSTS TO DATE OF THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN, 2001-2022	
Estimated Congressional Appropriations and Spending in Current Billions of U.S. Dollars, Excluding Future Interest Payments and Future Costs for Veterans Care	
	Total FY2001-FY2022*
Defense Department Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) (War) Budget	\$1,055
State Department OCO (War) Budget	60
Defense Department Base Budget War-Related Increases	433
Veterans Care for Afghan War Vets to Date	233
Estimated Interest on War Borrowing	532
TOTAL in Billions of Current Dollars	\$2,313
	*Rounded to nearest billion. Amounts for FY22 are budget requests.

Note: Since invading Afghanistan in 2001, the United States has spent \$2.313 trillion on the war, which includes operations in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Note that this total does *not* include funds that the United States government is obligated to spend on lifetime care for American veterans of this war, nor does it include future interest payments on money borrowed to fund the war. This \$2.313 trillion spent on Afghanistan is a portion of the total estimated cost of the post-9/11 wars... The numbers are approximations based on the reporting of several data sources

Source: Cost of War Project, Watson Institute, Brown University, August 2021, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022>. Accessed August 30, 2021.

The Cost of Waste; Corruption; and Failing to Establish an Effective System to Evaluate Programs and Proposed Spending, Program Completion, and Program Effectiveness; and the Need for Conditionality

Equally important, one of the most unforgivable failures of the war is that there are no estimates of how much of the aid money spent was actually spent on its intended purpose, stolen or diverted into corruption, or wasted – although again SIGAR and LIG reporting makes it doubtful that more than 70-80% of the funding ever served its intended purpose and the percentages for civilian aid spending were almost certainly much lower.

As has been discussed in detail, the U.S. and its allies failed for two decades to establish effective efforts to plan, program, budget, manage, and exert proper fiscal controls, ensure projects were actually completed, and ensure that they were actually effective. Furthermore, they failed to enforce conditionality that actually penalized the corrupt and incompetent and halted the flow of money when it was stolen or wasted.

Here SIGAR notes in its August 2021 lessons report that,⁴⁴

U.S. officials also prioritized their own political preferences for what they wanted reconstruction to look like, rather than what they could realistically achieve, given the constraints and conditions on the ground. Early in the war, U.S. officials denied the mission resources necessary to have an impact, and implicit deadlines made the task even harder. As security deteriorated and demands on donors increased, so did pressure to demonstrate progress. U.S. officials created explicit timelines in the mistaken belief that a decision in Washington could transform the calculus of complex Afghan institutions, powerbrokers, and communities contested by the Taliban.

By design, these timelines often ignored conditions on the ground and forced reckless compromises in U.S. programs, creating perverse incentives to spend quickly and focus on short-term, unsustainable goals that could not create the conditions to allow a victorious U.S. withdrawal. Rather than reform and improve, Afghan institutions and powerbrokers found ways to co-opt the funds for their own purposes, which only worsened the problems these programs were meant to address. When U.S. officials eventually recognized this dynamic, they simply found new ways to ignore conditions on the ground. Troops and resources continued to draw down in full view of the Afghan government's inability to address instability or prevent it from worsening.

... Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) ... is relatively straight forward, but in practice, it is extremely challenging. This is especially true in complex and unpredictable environments like Afghanistan, where staff turnover is rapid, multiple agencies must coordinate programs simultaneously, security and access restrictions make it hard to understand a program's challenges and impact, and a myriad of variables compete to influence outcomes. The absence of periodic reality checks created the risk of doing the wrong thing perfectly: A project that completed required tasks would be considered "successful," whether or not it had achieved or contributed to broader, more important goals.

SIGAR's extensive audit work on sectors spanning health, education, rule of law, women's rights, infrastructure, security assistance, and others collectively paints a picture of U.S. agencies struggling to effectively measure results while sometimes relying on shaky data to make claims of success...U.S. government's M&E efforts in Afghanistan have been underemphasized and understaffed because the overall campaign focused on doing as much as possible as quickly as possible, rather than ensuring programs were designed well to begin with and could adapt as needed. As a result, the U.S. government missed many opportunities to identify critical flaws in its interventions or to act on those that were identified. These shortcomings endangered the lives of U.S., Afghan, and coalition government personnel and civilians, and undermined progress toward strategic goals.

... Even basic oversight fell to the wayside. Enormous pressure to demonstrate progress to the Congress and the American and Afghan people distorted accountability systems into spin machines. There was little appetite for honest assessments of what worked and what did not. “When you push large amounts of money through and there’s no way to pull it back, it creates an incentive for corruption,” one former senior U.S. official told SIGAR. “Corrupt actors create ways to bleed the system for all it is worth, because they know the money will keep flowing no matter what they do.” Consulting Afghan government officials and project beneficiaries during project design and implementation slowed things down—so U.S. agencies and their contractors often did not bother. By spending money faster than it could be accounted for, the U.S. government ultimately achieved the opposite of what it intended: it fueled corruption, delegitimized the Afghan government, and increased insecurity.

... U.S. agencies should continue to explore how they can ensure they have the strategic planning capabilities, reconstruction doctrine, policies, best practices, standard operating procedures, institutional knowledge, and personnel structures necessary for both large and small reconstruction missions.

It is striking that a vast level of corruption and waste was documented throughout the war down to the actual collapse of the Afghan government and forces with so little progress and so little official willingness to act. Here, as the primary source of aid, the U.S. must take primary responsibility.

As has been discussed earlier, the United States not only failed to properly plan, program, budget, manage, evaluate progress, confirm completion, and monitor sustained effectiveness. It failed to establish conditionality, cut off money when waste and corruption present critical problems, and force out corruption and ineffective officials and officers. As SIGAR reports,⁴⁵

The U.S. government has sometimes placed conditions on its reconstruction funds to ensure that the Afghan government used the funds responsibly. Conditions can be financial or nonfinancial, and can involve a reduction of goods provided in-kind, such as fuel.

Although U.S. agencies have claimed some successes through conditionality, such as improving Afghan reporting and procedures, overall these efforts have failed because they lacked credibility. Nothing has been as important to U.S. officials as the survival and stability of the Afghan government, so reforms such as reducing corruption were often secondary. When U.S. officials imposed conditions on aid to incentivize reform, Afghan officials essentially called their bluff, knowing the U.S. government ultimately would not withhold critical assistance that Kabul desperately needed to ensure its survival. Conditions were announced, but not enforced.

For example, there do not appear to be any direct financial consequences to the Afghan government for violating the terms set by the latest mutual accountability framework, the 2020 Afghan partnership framework, which included commitments to democracy and full gender equality... If Afghanistan’s strategic importance to the United States decreases after U.S. troops are withdrawn, however, donor-imposed conditionality may become more credible. In fact, if the U.S. grows more willing to enforce them, the conditions tied to its reconstruction funding could become one of the primary means through which it exerts influence in the country.

The U.S. should literally have acted from the start to deal with these problems. It now needs to examine its other civil and military aid programs to see where such failures may be occurring, and it should prepare and enforce adequate measures to provide effective aid planning, coordination, execution, and conditionality for future wars and conflicts.

Looking at the Taliban's Funding and Costs: Narcotics, Extortion, and "The Other Side of the Hill"

The other side of the economics of the war also deserves careful attention. The U.S. and its allies spent an immense amount to fight and lose a war in a country that was often half a world away. The U.S. should carefully study how the Taliban financed its operations and what it cost the Taliban to win. The U.S. should simply engage on the basis of the Taliban's ability to fight. The U.S. should carefully assess the ability of its enemy to finance and sustain its operations, and what – if anything can be done to limit its resources and ability to sustain operations.

The open source analysis of the Taliban's fundraising, economics, and payment of its fighters is highly speculative. It seems clear that it did use extortion and the sale of opium and other narcotics, but their relative impact is unclear, as is its access to trade and mining revenues and outside funding. Much of the analysis now available seems largely speculative, and this could be critical if the U.S. uses aid as a future tool in pressuring the Taliban and presses for cutbacks in Afghan narcotics exports.

The importance of Afghan narcotics exports is clear. UNDOC's 2021 report on natural opiates notes that global cultivation rose 24% in 2020, and that,⁴⁶

The country in which the largest amount of opium is produced continues to be Afghanistan. Accounting for an estimated 83 per cent of global opium production over the period 2015–2020, opium produced in Afghanistan supplies markets in neighboring countries and in Europe, the Near and Middle East, South Asia and Africa. A small proportion of the opium produced in Afghanistan supplies markets in North America (notably Canada) and Oceania.

...The global area under opium poppy cultivation increased by 24 per cent in 2020 to about 294,000 ha, primarily owing to increases in Afghanistan, where the area under opium poppy cultivation increased by 37 per cent, to 224,000 ha, the third highest level ever reported in the country, and more than 80 per cent higher than a decade earlier... Increases were reported in most parts of the country, with the exception of the eastern region, where cultivation declined by 28 per cent, and two provinces in northern Afghanistan (Balkh and Jawzjan). In Helmand province, which accounts for more than 50 per cent of total area under opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan, opium poppy cultivation rose by 27 per cent in 2020. In a number of other provinces, including Badghis and Faryab, bordering Turkmenistan, and Ghazni and Zabul, close to Pakistan, the areas under opium poppy cultivation doubled.

...Data show that, in 2019, the last year for which comprehensive cultivation data are available, 69 per cent of the global area under opium poppy cultivation was located in Afghanistan, 14 per cent in Myanmar and 9 per cent in Mexico, suggesting that these three countries accounted for 92 per cent of global illicit cultivation of opium poppy that year... The stabilization of opium production in 2020 was the result of a decline of 20 per cent in opium production in Myanmar and the stabilization of opium production in Afghanistan. This occurred despite the increase in the area under opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan and was the result of a lower yield than in the previous year.

UNDOC makes it clear that there is a steady rise in processed Afghan heroin and morphine output as well as opium but does not estimate Afghan earnings or address the nature of the Afghan drug trade and its impact on government corruptions and Taliban earnings. There also is no detailed official open source U.S. reporting on the nature of the power structure managing the drug trade in Afghanistan, the role of the Taliban, or its income. The same is true of its estimated income from extortion and trade.

What is clear is that the Taliban had to get more of its local income from rural Districts and that it created a far more efficient structure for doing so and for managing and funding its fighters than many estimated before the collapse. A net assessment of these economics is likely to be a warning

about the cost of overcommitting U.S. resources or wasting them, particularly given the failures to make broad progress at the District level. This seems likely to be true even if one only looks at the fact the U.S. spent some \$8.6 billion dollars during 2002-2006 in an ineffective effort to end the Afghan drug trade and the \$4.7 billion on U.S. development aid at the District level. As SIGAR notes,⁴⁷

The United States spent \$4.7 billion trying to make district-level governments in contested areas seem responsive to their constituents. However, the United States failed to acknowledge that the districts had no budget to even maintain what had been built, much less continue the work...Worse, with the off-budget donor spigot turned on full blast—directing funds to implementing partners, not the Afghan government—the Afghan government faced no pressure to decentralize its budgetary process, which remains dysfunctional.

Some estimates put the Taliban's share of drug revenues at roughly half of the total, but they have no clear sources. A Reuters report in mid-August 2021 put annual farm income at a limited \$1.9, or 7% of the GDP in 2019.

When the value of drugs for export and local consumption are taken into account, along with imported precursor chemicals, the UNODC estimated the country's overall illicit opiate economy that year at as much as \$6.6 billion. Reuters reports that UNDOC indicates that:⁴⁸

The Taliban and public officials have long been involved in the narcotics trade, experts said, although some dispute the extent of the insurgents' role and profits.

The United Nations and Washington contend the Taliban are involved in all facets, from poppy planting, opium extraction, and trafficking to exacting "taxes" from cultivators and drug labs to charging smugglers fees for shipments bound for Africa, Europe, Canada, Russia, the Middle East, and other parts of Asia.

Some of those shipments are hurled across the heavily patrolled border to traffickers in Iran with rudimentary catapults, reported David Mansfield, a leading researcher into Afghanistan's illicit drug trade.

U.N. officials reported that the Taliban likely earned more than \$400 million between 2018 and 2019 from the drug trade. A May 2021 U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan (SIGAR) report quoted a U.S. official as estimating they derive up to 60% of their annual revenue from illicit narcotics.

... "The Taliban have counted on the Afghan opium trade as one of their main sources of income," Cesar Gudes, the head of the Kabul office of the U.N. Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), told Reuters. "More production brings drugs with a cheaper and more attractive price, and therefore a wider accessibility.

... Some experts dispute that data... Mansfield says his field studies show the most the Taliban can earn from illicit opiates is about \$40 million annually, predominantly from levies on opium production, heroin labs and drug shipments...The insurgents, he said, make more money exacting fees on legal imports and exports at roadside checkpoints.

Given the collapse, an accurate net assessment of comparative spending not only might provide major insights into the comparative economics and strategic choices of the U.S. and the Taliban in the Afghan War, it might tell a great deal about the future economics of the drug trade under a Taliban regime, the potential it has to govern without outside aid, and whether it is likely to make good on any of its statements that it does not support or tolerate the narcotics industry.

“Strategic Jingoism”: Treating Allies as Real Partners

There are several other areas an official lessons study should address. One is that an adequate assessment of the war must fully assess the way the U.S. treated its strategic partners, the role of allied powers, and the cost to them in blood and dollars. Such a study should not just focus on the United States. It should clearly recognize the problems with UNAMA and international organizations. It should also examine the role of 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 that played a critical role in the war.

As **Figure Thirty-Five** 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 replaced 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.

These forces withdrew as the U.S. cut its forces and were caught up in the same evacuation crisis. The SIGAR report for the second quarter of 2021 notes that,⁴⁹

NATO Resolute Support (RS) informed SIGAR this quarter that Coalition forces have been reducing their footprint in Afghanistan in concert with U.S. forces. As of June 12, 2021, some U.S. capabilities shifted to an “over-the-horizon location.” Other Coalition forces also withdrew, with Germany and Italy ending their Afghanistan missions in the last week of June, the United Kingdom announcing the end of their mission July 8, and Australia announcing on July 11 that their last personnel had left Afghanistan “in recent weeks.” At least 16 smaller contingents reportedly withdrew earlier in June or May.

Long before this, however, 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 Thirty-Five** also shows, allied countries also played a major role in providing a Provincial Reconstruction Team that was 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. 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.

SIGAR notes that,⁵⁰

Just as the United States struggled to implement a coordinated, unified strategy in Afghanistan, so too did the international community, as exemplified by the experience of NATO. Although NATO partners undoubtedly added value to the U.S.-led mission, command and control issues and “national caveats” hamstrung NATO’s effectiveness and hindered the United States’ ability to make the most of coalition support.

The command and control issues that plagued NATO in Afghanistan can be traced to the organization’s creation in the 1940s as a counter-Soviet alliance that granted member states full control over deployed forces and prioritized political unity among member states at the expense of operational unity between their militaries. In fact, the treaty grants member states so much independence that the chain of command back to the force’s home country always supersedes NATO orders, even in cases of operational plans, strategic

directives, and rules of engagement that have been approved by consensus among member countries NATO's principal decision-making body, the North Atlantic Council. In practice, this means that national commanders can disobey orders from their multinational NATO commander if they object to the action... One former NATO commander said his role was often reduced to providing strategic guidance, rather than commanding forces. In other words, there was no single authority leading NATO forces in Afghanistan.

In addition to ad hoc decisions about whether to cooperate with the multinational commander's orders, member countries also had the option to carve out specific restrictions in advance on how their forces could be used. These restrictions, called "national caveats," meant that dozens of NATO countries limited how, when, and where their forces could be employed. This created a significant logistical burden for multinational commanders, who had to sort through nearly 60 caveats to determine who was even eligible to fulfill a mission— assuming they would accept it... Most restrictions imposed geographic limitations on a force, but others specified whether a force could take offensive actions, defensive actions, or only observe targets; others specified whether a force could operate at night, or only during daylight... These onerous restrictions sometimes created tensions within the alliance between countries that restricted their forces, and those that felt they were bearing an inequitable share of the combat burden.

These comments address problems that were all too real, but they ignore the fact that the U.S. could have done far more to lead and work with its allies if it had treated them as real partners, rather than adjuncts to its own efforts or as ways of reducing its own commitment of resources. 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 military efforts lacked a major policy level and command imperative within the U.S. effort, and they 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.

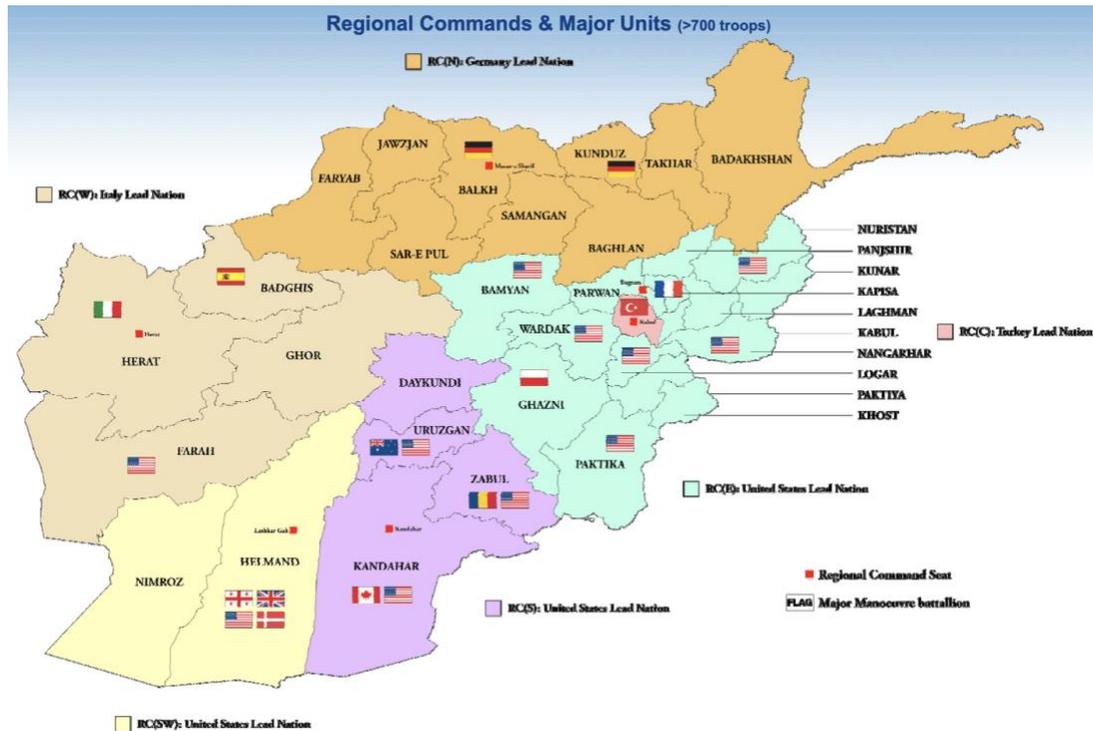
In short, the U.S. not only needs to learn from its own military experience, it needs to learn from the experience of its allies and from the role played by NATO, ISAF, and RSM. At the most basic level, it is a form of diplomatic "jingoism" to ignore the roles and sacrifices of one's allies. It also is a key way of limiting their effectiveness, understanding their limits, and understanding where allied experience and approaches to warfare may be superior.

Figure Thirty-Five: Allied Forces Contributing to ISAF Mission at Its Peak in January 2012 – I

Troop Contributing Nations								
	Albania	286		Georgia	935		Norway	433
	Armenia	126		Germany	4,818		Poland	2,475
	Australia	1,550		Greece	154		Portugal	118
	Austria	3		Hungary	413		Romania	1,876
	Azerbaijan	94		Iceland	4		Singapore	39
	Bahrain	95		Ireland	7		Slovakia	329
	Belgium	520		Italy	3,952		Slovenia	79
	Bosnia & Herzegovina	55		Jordan	0		Spain	1,488
	Bulgaria	598		Republic of Korea	350		Sweden	500
	Canada*	556		Latvia	175		The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia**	163
	Croatia	312		Lithuania	237		Tonga	55
	Czech Republic	626		Luxembourg	11		Turkey	1,845
	Denmark	750		Malaysia	46		Ukraine	23
	El Salvador	24		Mongolia	114		United Arab Emirates	35
	Estonia	154		Montenegro	37		United Kingdom	9,500
	Finland	156		Netherlands	166		United States	90,000
	France	3,916		New Zealand	188		Total	130,386

Source: NATO ISAF archive, https://www.nato.int/isaf/placemats_archive/2012-01-06-ISAF-Placemat.pdf; and NATO RSM, February 2021, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/2/pdf/2021-02-RSM-Placemat.pdf.

Figure Thirty-Five: Allied Forces Contributing to ISAF Mission at Its Peak in January 2012 – II



Source: NATO ISAF archive, https://www.nato.int/isaf/placemats_archive/2012-01-06-ISAF-Placemat.pdf; and NATO RSM, February 2021, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/2/pdf/2021-02-RSM-Placemat.pdf.

The Lessons from Neighboring and Outside Powers

At the same time, the analysis of the lessons of war should also focus far more on how the impact of the host country and U.S. military efforts are shaped by as well as affected by neighboring and other outside states. In the case of Afghanistan, the U.S. needs to declassify enough data to allow a clear analysis of the role of Pakistan and the extent to which it did or did not cooperate with the Taliban – as well as what the effects were on the fighting. Various analysts have suggested that Pakistan provided such support and effectively hosted Taliban and other hostile forces while playing the role of any ally. Pakistan sharply denies this, and these uncertainties again illustrate the need for careful planning.

Similarly, the U.S. should analyze reports on Iran’s initial cooperation with the U.S., although it ended with President Bush’s inclusion of Iran in the “axis of evil” in his 2002 State of the Union speech. The initial support of Russia as well as using bases in Central Asian states and in friendly Gulf states are equally important. The U.S. cannot project power efficiently and often effectively from continental United States. The lessons in projecting power to a host country and in using bases in other countries are another area which deserve key attention.

So does the need to create massive semi-permanent facilities like air and land bases, embassy compounds, and security zones. Doing it “our way” not only may not suit the host country, it may well lead to major unnecessary increases in cost.

In broader terms, the question also now arises as to how the U.S. should shape its strategic partnerships and major combatant commands to provide and preserve contingency capabilities for the future. Some of the emphasis on competing with China and Russia seems to ignore the possibility that they already are beginning to compete with the U.S. in many of the areas where it has dominated power projection options in the past – and that their focus on gray area, spoiler operations, arms transfers, and their use of “volunteers” and “third parties” may make it far more difficult for the U.S. to operate in key areas.

Seeking a Peace with No Plans For Afghanistan’s Future

As has been touched upon earlier, the U.S. never developed effective contingency plans to deal with the impact on Afghanistan when it ended its role in Afghanistan or at any point in the war. It had no plans for dealing with the impact of conflict termination, even when it advanced its so-called February 2020 peace agreement – an agreement that only called for negotiations and an end to attacks on U.S. and allied forces – but set a firm deadline for withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan.

How the February 2020 peace agreement was reached and why it led to immediate deadlines for U.S. withdrawal will be another key source of lessons, and it is one where there now are so little open source data on the details of the U.S. decision-making process that it is possible to do little more than speculate. Some of the open source data on the sequence of events do strongly indicate, however, that the decision to withdraw was made without any real U.S. plan that could have resulted in a lasting peace, and certainly without fully consulting the Afghan government.

Reporting from the Chair of the UN Security Council Committee covering Afghanistan and its Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team strongly implies that any serious planning efforts – if there were serious efforts and the peace negotiations were ever actually more than

diplomatic cover for U.S. withdrawals – came long after the February agreement and withdrawal plan was announced. A UN Security Council Report issued on May 21, 2021 states that,⁵¹

The key development between May 2020 and April 2021 has been the evolution of the peace process in Afghanistan pursuant to the agreement signed in Doha in February 2020 and the stated intention of the United States of America and allied forces to complete their withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 2021. The international community, including a range of Member States, increased engagement during the period under review, with a view to promoting peace in Afghanistan.

The first round of intra-Afghan negotiations between Taliban and Islamic Republic delegations in Doha began on 12 September 2020, followed by several meetings seeking agreement on a code of conduct for the negotiation process. Talks resumed on 5 January 2021 following a break.

By late February, Taliban statements emphasized their full compliance with the agreement, while alleging non-compliance by the United States. On 28 February 2021, in a statement to mark the anniversary of the Doha agreement, the Taliban laid responsibility for implementation of the agreement with Qatar, the United Nations, other countries and international observers present at the signing ceremony. The statement provided no detail as to a way forward.

In response to the announcement by Washington, D.C., regarding a policy review and reappraisal of the Doha agreement, the Taliban issued several statements, ranging from appeals for the United States to abide by the withdrawal deadline, to threats of attacks should they remain beyond it. In February 2021, Taliban first deputy Sirajuddin Jallaloudine Haqqani (TAi.144) stated that failure to abide by the terms of the agreement would result in unprecedented Taliban offensives.

On 11 April, the Taliban insisted that any breach of the 1 May deadline would automatically lead to a resumption in attacks. The Taliban dismissed any notion of extending the deadline as having no benefit, reiterating that re-establishment of the “Islamic Emirate”, and not maintaining a democratic system, was the only option on the table.

The United States shared a draft peace plan calling for discussions between the parties regarding how a political solution to the conflict might unfold, including guiding principles for the future of Afghanistan and a political road map for a transitional peace government, pending elections under a new constitution. Talks complementary to those in Doha were slated for 16 April in Istanbul (later postponed to 24 April–4 May). On 12 April, the Taliban Political Commission stated that they were still to make a final decision on participation. Despite this, on 13 April, a joint statement by Turkey, Qatar and the United Nations officially announced the Istanbul conference on the Afghanistan peace process.

On 14 April, United States President Biden announced the withdrawal of all American and allied troops from Afghanistan by the twentieth anniversary of the 11 September 2001 attacks. One day earlier, following media reporting on the impending announcement, the Taliban issued a statement via Twitter that they would not take part in any conference intended to decide the future of Afghanistan until all foreign troops had departed. As of the writing of the present report, it is unclear when formal talks will resume.

A SIGAR report drafted shortly before the collapse of the Afghan government and forces indicates that the origins of such withdrawal efforts began even before the Trump administration came to office:⁵²

While most security trend lines were moving in the wrong direction, the end of the surge compelled the U.S. government to start considering how it might withdraw without defeating the Taliban. Beginning at least as early as 2010, U.S. officials participated in a series of meetings with Taliban intermediaries and officials to facilitate a peace agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government... By 2017, this logic had gained considerable momentum. However, at that point, with most troops out and the Taliban making gains, the U.S. government lacked the leverage to extract Taliban concessions at the negotiating table. To compensate, the Trump administration modestly increased troops and security assistance—and significantly

increased bombings—in order to drive the Taliban to the negotiating table and achieve the “ultimate objective” of a political settlement that would end the war for all parties...

Significant movement became possible when U.S. officials dropped a long-held principle by agreeing to announce a tentative withdrawal date before “intra-Afghan” negotiations had even begun. U.S. officials hoped this major offering would induce a series of Taliban concessions, including reducing violence and breaking ties with al-Qaeda, neither of which have happened. In fact, since the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement that formalized the arrangement, the Taliban has significantly increased violence, including assassination campaigns of government officials, journalists, and civil society actors. Meanwhile, the Taliban’s ties to al-Qaeda only appear to be deepening, with al-Qaeda fighters now spread across 15 Afghan provinces.

In other words, the U.S. government’s neglect of the strategy’s “ways” did not end with the surge but continued even as the U.S. scaled back its investment. U.S. officials ramped up the war without properly considering how they would fulfil the strategy, and ramped down in the misguided hope that they could influence the Taliban’s decision making through negotiations. Because the group has been ascendant on the battlefield for more than a decade, it was poorly motivated to indulge peace talks beyond what was necessary to secure the release of more than 5,000 prisoners, ensure the removal of U.S. and UN sanctions, accrue international legitimacy, and claim credit for negotiating the departure of U.S. forces. Notably, none of those objectives required compromise with the Afghan government. Describing recent intra-Afghan peace talks in Doha, one senior Afghan government negotiator said, “[The Taliban] thought they were there just to discuss the terms of [the government’s] surrender. They said, ‘We don’t need to talk to you. We can just take over.’”

In April 2021, the Biden administration announced that a full U.S. military withdrawal would be complete by September, regardless of Taliban advances or where prospects for peace stood...The decision left uncertain whether even the modest gains of the last two decades will prove sustainable. It was also the first explicit recognition by the U.S. government that its strategy across two decades had failed to bring the desired change and stood little chance of doing so.

This raises another critical potential lesson of the war that needs full and detailed investigation. If President Trump’s decision to withdraw in February 2020 came months before the U.S. presented (and possibly had) any peace plan, and President Biden then issued his revised September 2021 deadline without any serious progress in negotiations, both decisions had to have given the Taliban a massive incentive to keep fighting. This again raises serious questions as to whether either administration ever really expected a meaningful peace negotiation to take place on terms that did not strongly favor the Taliban.

In fairness to the Biden administration, however, it did inherit the Trump administration’s announcement of a withdrawal deadline before there was a peace agreement and that undermined U.S. leverage from the start. If the February 2020 negotiation actually did focus on a “withdrawal agreement” rather than a “peace agreement,” this raises serious questions as to whether the U.S. had actually decided to withdraw regardless of the outcome. It also raises questions to whether the U.S. was offering peace negotiations as a largely cosmetic or face-saving cover for withdrawal, rather than trying to create a real basis for peace negotiations. Here, the full historical record of such efforts, if one exists, should be fascinating.

The Need for Strategic Triage

Finally, a lessons study must examine why the U.S. stayed the course for decades and then precipitously left. 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. The U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam was followed by the defeat and collapse of South Vietnam, but then a Vietnamese war with China reversed that and, 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, the U.S. also 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 – including the lasting presence of ISIS-K – 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 as well as 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 extremist 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 that the UN, World Bank, IMF, and a host of NGOs have given on the 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 that other uses of the aid to other countries might have accomplished.

A global power must engage in analysis that Marc Genest and James Holmes have called strategic triage.⁵³ It must make hard choices in how it uses the resources it 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.

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¹⁰ SIGAR, Quarterly Report to Congress, Second Quarter 2021, pp. 130, 131.

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