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# We Lost - But Who *Won* The War In Afghanistan: Critical Lessons For Future Western Engagement

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Far from an “orderly drawdown” and without conferring with NATO allies, President Biden<sup>1</sup> in April announced the end of the US engagement in Afghanistan. Having the psychological momentum, the Afghan Taliban effectively exploited the vacuum left by the sudden pullout of the remaining Western forces and contractors — a few thousand mostly serving in support roles — and soon overran rural Afghan government forces in the provinces. By mid-August, stunningly, in just five days two (Herat in the west and Kandahar in the south) and then four (Mazar-i-Sharif in the north and Jalalabad in the east) of Afghanistan’s biggest cities fell without government forces and the coopted warlords putting up a fight.

After, President Ghani fled to Tadzshikistan, leaving a Kabul in disarray to fend for what his number two, Abdullah Abdullah, called a “peaceful transition of power.” As in South Vietnam, American helicopters evacuated Embassy staff from the rooftop while the adversary was entering the capital — with, as Iraq after the Obama withdrawal, Western-bought Humvees, pickup trucks, and weaponry.

In English-language media and expert forums, questions who<sup>2</sup> lost the war in Afghanistan to the Afghan Taliban and why<sup>3</sup> had already risen. Yet a shift from an overemphasis on military means to whose (indirect) Clausewitzian (geo)political objectives were served is needed: the 300,000 Afghan National Army had all it needed against a much smaller foe. As Cordesman<sup>4</sup> states: “at least half of the failures were civil.” And although the

buzz will soon once more be all about China, it is nonetheless crucial for successful future Western intervention to critically reflect on what lessons can be learned. Another disgraceful strategic failure, the question must be: who actually won America’s Longest War?

To answer this question, first, we have to turn back the clock on two decades of protracted “mission creep” to the initial, highly successful circumscribed US campaign against Al Qaeda and their direct support network that employed air power, ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), and special forces/paramilitary CIA operatives in the months that followed 9/11. Over 2400 US casualties and more than \$ 2, 313 trillion<sup>5</sup> later, the Biden administration now in all

<sup>1</sup> Lauren Fedor and Aime Williams, “Joe Biden to announce withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan,” *Financial Times*, April 13, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/844c9c9d-cee9-433b-b5f5-0b996c68f2a7>

<sup>2</sup> Max Boot, “The Taliban defeated America. Let the blame game begin,” *Washington Post*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/07/12/who-lost-afghanistan-debate/>

<sup>3</sup> Carter Malkasian, “What America Didn’t Understand About America’s Longest War,” *Politico*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/07/06/afghanistan-war-malkasian-book-excerpt-497843>

<sup>4</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, “Learning from the War: “Who Lost Afghanistan” versus Learning “Why We Lost,” August 11, 2021, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/learning-war-who-lost-afghanistan-versus-learning-why-we-lost>

<sup>5</sup> Brown University Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, “U.S. Costs to Date for the War in Afghanistan, in \$ billions FY2001 – FY2022,” accessed October 14, 2021, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2021>

but name returns to this strategy by redeploying to a regional “over-the-horizon capability.”<sup>6</sup>

However, that war is not the war the US and NATO just lost. The war with the political objective<sup>7</sup> of stopping the “export of terror” and those governments that “support or shelter them” was largely won within months. (Admittedly, one cannot measure success by the attacks that did not happen.) Absent a blowout doing justice to the magnitude of the loss and humiliation at home, the counterterrorism campaign quickly morphed into a wide-ranging preventative counterinsurgency war against the former host-nation, the Afghan Taliban, including a “4-D” strategy that came to include nation-building and the military policing of remote cities and villages.

Besides the lack of a clearly stated end goal, the problem is that these nationally oriented tribal groupings were never our enemy, threatening the homeland of the US or its European allies. A loosely organized umbrella movement that is firmly rooted in the Pashtun populations of Southern and Eastern Afghanistan, and present across the mountainous borderlands into Northwestern Pakistan, the Afghan Taliban were also an adversary impossible to defeat: socio-historically (a fiercely independent people that has never really been conquered) and demographically (a huge reservoir of young, uneducated people in the countryside with little prospects); cultural-politically (no credible Mao-style mobilizing ideational narrative by the Afghan government); spatially-geographically and tactically-militarily (safe havens across the border in nuclear-armed and hence uncompeable<sup>8</sup> Pakistan waging a “war among the people” — the inability to isolate); and financially (in addition to the unwillingness to cut off the illicit (poppy) war economy, sponsoring from the non-state Pan-Islamist movement in the Gulf).

What the US in essence did, and NATO later signed up on, was immerse itself into an existing stalemated civil war, bringing the so-called “Northern Alliance” consisting of mostly Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek minorities to Kabul, coopting regional warlords, and propping up its new security forces. But the highly centralized democratic system adopted set the nation-building project up for failure from the start, the military side of things postponing an inevitable reckoning through immense official and civilian Afghan suffering.

Put simply: a large part of Afghanistan’s population — principally the majority Pashtun (42% of the population<sup>9</sup>) — is just profoundly religious-conservative (think, conversely, of the moderately progressive reforms pursued by the “puppet” administrations in Kabul, such as schooling for women); and the installed Afghan bureaucracy and police incredibly corrupt and not seldom morally abject, and fiscally, administratively incapable (and/or unwilling) to deliver the basic goods and justice needed for a minimal degree of popular legitimacy (i.e. a viable social contract).

Ironically, these were roughly the same ills beleaguering the administrations under the Socialist-Marxist People’s Democratic Party (1978-1992), during nine years of which another “infidel” outsider, the Soviet Union, supported it in a similar way. Hence rather than just a “war among the people,” it was a war against a substantial part of the population in a substantial part of the country: the Pashtun, who have dominated politics in the nation for most of its history. Indeed Presidents Karzai and Ghani, though Pashtun, were not produced by the main Pashtun power brokers and the artificial lines drawn by the transplanted democratic experiment did not reflect the historical ethnic and tribal power structures on the ground.

<sup>6</sup> The White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan,” July 8, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan/>

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of State (Archive), “The Global War on Terrorism: The First 100 Days,” accessed October 14, 2021, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/ct/rls/wh/6947.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Library of Congress Federal Research Division, “Country Profile: Afghanistan,” August 2008, <https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/cs/profiles/Afghanistan.pdf>

Worse still, the US military and civilian leadership knew that the war was unwinnable for most of its duration. As the Afghanistan Papers<sup>10</sup> show, there was little “change” in the false optimism the civilian and military leadership espoused during the Obama administration (the Trump administration being on another level of honesty entirely), escalating the war through the “surge” a decade in. Nevertheless, while alienating many (i.e. being contra the tribal code of Pashtunwali), its signature part ramping up Petraeus’ aggressive kill/capture night raids failed to yield long-term strategic gains on the battlefield, as just as if not more radical ones easily replaced top cadres and Afghan forces were unable to hold the rural areas ostensibly secured.

But if this wasn’t a new war but an existing civil war, whose interests did the Afghan Taliban insurgency serve and who propelled and sustained it? After all, as Kiras<sup>11</sup> rightly notes, invariably “external physical and moral support for an insurgent cause is a prerequisite for success” — in our case, most important to maintain an insurgency are the funneling of arms and munitions, facilitation of military training of new recruits, and the ideational nurturing in the Salafist strand of Sunni Islam.

By now, it is well known what Al Qaeda wanted<sup>12</sup> (and got) out of the 9/11 attacks: a US overreaction. While it did expedite US relative decline and the power shift to China and Asia, the US forward deployed basing system is still entrenched in the Islamic world and the Ummah, the Caliphate, has not been reestablished barring a brief, geographically limited stated reincarnation under ISIS (which all Muslim “apostate” states rallied against). Note here that Shah Massoud, the leader of the Northern Alliance and before that an imposing figure in the

mujahedeen’s fight against the Soviets, was, tellingly, assassinated two days before 9/11, preventing him to lead the charge that Bin Laden knew would follow.

Who did score an all out if not incredibly risky (it backfired<sup>13</sup>) win was Pakistan’s military, spearheaded by its infamous intelligence service, the ISI. As Fair<sup>14</sup> and others have detailed, from the foundational support for the anti-Soviet mujahedeen in the 1980s (then still with the help of the US, and Saudi Arabia), to the founding of the Afghan Taliban in 1994, to the anti-American insurgency post-9/11, the military-controlled state of Pakistan was there every step of the way. The US has given its asserted partner, Pakistan, \$ 33 billion<sup>15</sup> in assistance since 2002.

Its political aims were and are pretty straightforward: a Pakistan-friendly regime next door, preventing a potential two-front war with archrival India with which much smaller Pakistan has been obsessed with since Partition. Hanauer and Chalk<sup>16</sup> succinctly captured Pakistan’s interests in Afghanistan as follows: “maintain “strategic depth” against an Indian invasion, guarantee safe haven for Islamist proxies that it supports, prevent Delhi from projecting power in South Asia, and obstruct India’s ability to support separatists in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan.”

Unmistakably, herein Pakistan’s military establishment has been successful: the Afghan government never established full effective control over Southern and Eastern Afghanistan, securing Pakistan’s western flank from Indian encroachment. That said, Pakistan’s asserted Indian involvement in Afghanistan over the last twenty years has been greatly exaggerated for reasons of political expediency.

<sup>10</sup> Craig Whitlock, “The Afghanistan Papers, a secret history of the war: At war with the truth,” December 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>

<sup>11</sup> James D. Kiras, “Irregular Warfare: Terrorism and Insurgency” in *Strategy in the Contemporary World*, eds. John Baylis, James J. Wirtz, and Colin Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Dominic Tierney, “The Twenty Years’ War,” *Atlantic*, August 23, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/08/twenty-years-war/496736/>

<sup>13</sup> Madiha Afzal, “Terrorism in Pakistan has declined, but the underlying roots of extremism remain,” *Brookings Institution*, January 15, 2021,

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/15/terrorism-in-pakistan-has-declined-but-the-underlying-roots-of-extremism-remain/>

<sup>14</sup> C. Christine Fair, *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan’s Army War of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, “Exclusive: Pentagon cancels aid to Pakistan over record on militants,” *Reuters*, September 1, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pakistan-military-exclusive/exclusive-pentagon-cancels-aid-to-pakistan-over-record-on-militants-idUSKCN1LH3TA>

<sup>16</sup> Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk, “India’s and Pakistan’s Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the region,” *RAND*, 2012, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional\\_papers/2012/RAND\\_OP387.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP387.pdf)

Now, as much as the Western democracies want to be done with irregular warfare, and violent Islamism, and focus on the challenges we understand better (i.e. great power competition with China and Revolution in Military Affairs-fought symmetric battles), it is sure to persist in the 21st century parallel to traditional international security challenges. This brings us to the lessons learned for future Western engagement based on restraint:

- Know thy adversary (if it absolutely has to be one) and stick to your own playbook (long-term interests, in any case maintaining a fiscally healthy, competitive material-economic base) instead of doing what they lure you into doing (don't overreact/stretch!). Like criminals in pretrial detention, in the end terrorists want to talk, as without it, the violence serves no political end. Find out what their red lines are (e.g. the garrisoning of troops in their holy land), and don't outright brush-off their rhetoric as non-rational. Not all Islamists abroad need be our adversaries and most have discernable political aims or grievances that are represented within the societies they hail from;
- Prevent recruitment of future terrorists/insurgents — and general animosity — by being very careful when considering to once again bombing Muslims. While we are largely insulated from the lethal aftermath of Western air campaigns, news agencies like Al Arabiya make sure the Muslim world is not. Also don't let tactics become the strategy (e.g. the air/artillery bombing of mud-brick villages where distant fire originated, with high civilian casualties);
- Use only local forces in combat roles from the get-go, forces selected and deployed with regard for regional differences. They are familiar with the local/tribal culture and traditions and are hence better equipped to

deal with the “human terrain.” This also shows soon enough if there is the required feeling of ownership. If you can't find enough good men<sup>17</sup> (the elusive yet all-decisive notion of “morale”) with the willingness to kill and die for the cause, then that says it all and should be the end of it;

- A great majority of national stakeholders have to have skin in the game. The maxim here should be: no reliable, credible political partner on the ground, no ground game. South Vietnam and many other costly failures should have already made that abundantly clear. Some sense of civil society and a working bureaucracy should be two of the main indicators for viable external engagement to look out for;
- Insurgencies are won or lost with ideas. The Afghan government was never really able to separate the Afghan Taliban from the populous in their native Pashtun lands and push them back from Mao's<sup>18</sup> stage 2 (stalemate) of the insurgency to a stage 1 (strategic defensive). What appealing narrative was there to genuinely win the “hearts and minds” of the rural conservatives (countering the hardcore dogma from the Gulf-sponsored madrassas)?;
- Indeed this goes to the next point: choose your international partners carefully. Propping up authoritarians without much popular legitimacy comes with a price. Never fund those ideologically opposed to your core, foundational principles. It often boomerangs back (a couple administrations later) to bite you in the ass while the short-term gains of supplying them with e.g. your fighter jets are questionable;
- Further ask yourself the question who could ultimately benefit from your intervention, and whether that is in your long-term strategic interest (i.e. collateral damage —

<sup>17</sup> Craig Whitlock, “The Afghanistan Papers, a secret history of the war: Unguarded nation,” December 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanist-an-papers/afghanistan-war-army-police/>

<sup>18</sup> Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

Jervis' "system effects"<sup>19</sup> and Obama's<sup>20</sup> "don't do stupid shit"). Don't let historical bad blood or the stifling rigidity from the "foreign policy establishment"<sup>21</sup> steer you into fallible directions others before you have failed. In any case, limit yourself to your direct periphery, and let other great powers do the dirty work in their region;

- The last point is on means. In addition to Iran and its proxies expanding their regional influence post-2003 Iraq, on the Sunni side, the Islamist and terrorist challenge is after 20 years of the Global War on Terror considerably bigger in numbers and regional presence, not less. A fundamental overhaul of what successful counterterrorism/insurgency is seems desperately needed, and should at a minimum include a maximalist conception of the human security<sup>22</sup> paradigm — if we decide to go in big at all. In peacetime, invest in region-country specialists who know the culture and language and, preferably, are from the regions you know nothing about<sup>23</sup> — the Vali Nasrs have to be in the lead informing the execution of (cultural-sensitive) policy on the ground, not just the security people.

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Photo credit **Wikimedia Commons**: Soldiers of 1st Battalion the Coldstream Guards are pictured in a poppy field waiting for a Chinook Helicopter to extract them, following operations in Afghanistan.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> David Rothkopf, "Obama's Don't Do Stupid Shit" Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy*, June 4, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/04/obamas-dont-do-stupid-shit-foreign-policy/>

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

<sup>22</sup> Gunhild Hoogensen Gjørsv, "Human Security" in *Security Studies: An Introduction*, eds. Paul D. Williams and Matt Macdonald (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Anatol Lieven, "Why Afghan Forces So Quickly Laid Down Their Arms," *Politico*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/08/16/afghanistan-history-taliban-collapse-504977?fbclid=IwAR1KSMENZmOb3fu-tpEvJz52IfF0DadkLwOa5j3v-Heb3UkPEAEkd4t7C8>