

## US Strategy in Afghanistan: Military and Civilian Aspects

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**Abstract:** 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.

**Keywords:** Afghan war, Operation Enduring Freedom, Strategy, Military efforts, Insurgency, ISAF, ANSF.

### Operation Enduring Freedom: process and results

Over 20 years in Afghanistan, the United States explored the full menu of war strategies. Operation Enduring Freedom opened in 2001 with a novel combination of Special Forces, local proxies, and airpower [1].

After the fall of the Taliban regime, the United States waged an open-ended counterterrorism campaign against al Qaeda and its allies. When its efforts to delegate development and state-building to its European allies foundered, the United States was reluctantly drawn into training Afghan security forces and sponsoring economic development. When these new measures failed to stem the return of the Taliban, the United States backed into a counterinsurgency campaign.

The counterinsurgency campaign and US ambitions reached their apogee between 2009 and 2011. With the surge, the United States assumed the lead in security, governance, and development, and the ensuing increase in resources and ambitions soon outstripped the perceived value of the object in Afghanistan. With the killing of Osama bin Ladin in 2011, the United States began to disengage from its sprawling Afghan enterprise. During this withdrawal, the United States sought to buttress its client army as it removed the military, bureaucratic, and financial scaffolding it had built around the Afghan state.

On a deeper level, Operation Enduring Freedom can be seen as two, intertwined tragedies. The first involved the crippling American ambivalence toward intervention in civil war. That ambivalence pitted the evangelical impulse to save Afghanistan through intervention and good works against an equally powerful desire to limit entanglements and transform by example rather than deed. The second tragedy was one that long preceded American intervention: the Afghan war between town and countryside. For much of the preceding century, urban elites eager to modernize and centralize had collided with conservative rural populations equally committed to resisting social change and holding the government at arm's length. That struggle continued throughout the US engagement and did much to undermine the West's efforts to build a functioning Afghan state.

The failure of the US campaign stands at the intersection of these tragedies. The inability of the United States to reconcile its desire to transform Afghanistan with its aversion to entanglement drew it from a modest opening role in 2002, to a dominating one by 2009, and finally to disillusionment and disengagement by 2014. By backing Afghanistan's urban elites, the United States became the underwriter of a renewed war between the center and the periphery. Unable to convert and modernize

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the countryside with its own resources, the Afghan government substituted American muscle and money; rapid US disengagement left the Afghan government dangerously overextended.

The Taliban alliance seemed no more likely to win in a lasting sense. Having failed to govern the center in the 1990s, the Taliban were nevertheless unwilling to forgo a new bid for control of the center.

Following a coherent strategy in Afghanistan required policymakers to answer four fundamental questions. First, what was the purpose of US involvement in Afghanistan? Second, how could that be translated into concrete objectives? Third, what was the value of Afghanistan? Fourth, how much was enough in terms of men and money to achieve the purposes and goals set out? The failure to arrive at firm and consistent answers to these questions explains much of the confusion, waste, and misallocation of resources that bedeviled the US campaign.

While the purpose of US involvement was reasonably clear in 2001, translating this into tangible objectives proved more challenging over time. Early on, punishing al Qaeda and deterring future attacks on the homeland were the rationale for invading Afghanistan. Once the Taliban had been overthrown, the sequel was to pursue the remaining terrorists, destroy their networks, and prevent their return. The problem was that accomplishing this aim demanded the construction of some political order in Afghanistan. From 2002 through 2014, the United States seesawed between minimalist visions of state construction and more expansive ones based on the late stages of the Iraq War.

As resource demands increased, it was logical to ask what Afghanistan was worth. In part, this calculation hinged on judgments about the magnitude of the terrorist threat; in part, this was a question about which theaters were most important to preventing future attacks on the homeland. Thus the perceived value of Afghanistan was rooted in domestic political judgment. As the specter of 9/11 receded, popular sentiment and attention waned, and the high costs and frustrations of Iraq drove down the American appetite for protracted war.

Finally, successive military commanders and ambassadors struggled to specify how much was enough to accomplish the goals set by the Bush and Obama administrations. As the insurgency returned and the challenges of state-building became apparent, leaders often found themselves in holding actions with the Taliban and with political leaders in Washington.

US leaders invested the minimum necessary not to lose in Afghanistan in the hope that they would muddle through in the end. It may be too early to know whether the United States can still succeed in its aims or secure its client state in the long run. The object of this article is to trace the evolution of US strategy and provide some sense of the relationship between changing theories of victory and the nature of the problems on the ground.

In the end, what can be said about Operation Enduring Freedom and the likelihood of a stable Afghan state emerging in its aftermath? From the vantage point of 2015, it is clear that the durability of the Afghan order will depend on three variables: the resilience of the Afghan state, US support, and the strategies of the insurgents and their sponsors.

### **Insurgency groups activity and tactics**

The opening act of the US war in Afghanistan was the ouster of the Taliban and the pursuit of al Qaeda. The Taliban's refusal to hand over Osama bin Ladin and his allies in the wake of the 9/11 attacks triggered US preparations for the invasion of Afghanistan.

The purpose of this military action was to prevent a second round of attacks in the United States. The Bush administration translated this into a plan to kill or capture the al Qaeda leadership and fighters inside Afghanistan and topple the Taliban regime. By doing so, it sought not only to punish al Qaeda but to deter other terrorist groups and sponsors from considering attacks on the American homeland [2].

The strategy that emerged was highly unorthodox. It was conceived and led by the CIA, and it combined small US Special Forces teams and US airpower to amplify the power of the existing



Afghan Northern Alliance. The CIA's Counterterrorism Center director, Cofer Black, and his deputy, Hank Crumpton, planned to use US money to rent the allegiance of Afghan warlords and US airpower to overthrow the al Qaeda / Taliban coalition.

The results of the two campaigns were staggering in scale, speed, and cost. By the end of the year, there were only 110 CIA and 350 US Special Forces personnel in Afghanistan. These advisors, armed with US airpower and \$70 million in cash, had led a coalition of 20,000 Afghans to defeat the 40,000–60,000 Taliban troops and drive the remnants and their al Qaeda allies to the borders of Afghanistan. They had managed to do this in 50 days at a cost of fewer than 25 US lives. By any reasonable measure, this was an astounding success and one that promised to secure US aims at minimal cost [3].

The swift ouster of the Taliban forced the United States to reassess its purpose and objectives in Afghanistan. The administration's commitment to prevent future attacks on the American homeland made a vigorous pursuit of al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan the logical sequel to regime change. As a result, counterterrorism became the focus of almost all military operations from 2002 through the return of the Taliban in 2005-2006.

If killing and capturing terrorists was a tangible objective, the related goal of denying them sanctuary was more problematic. While it was reasonable to want to eliminate al Qaeda's sanctuaries, denying the enemy access to a vast territory spanning Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan would be more demanding and more resource intensive than the defeat of the Taliban regime. Furthermore, the denial of sanctuary implied a derivative project – the construction of an Afghan political order to fill the vacuum and support counterterrorism.

These twin challenges would bedevil the Americans and their Western allies from 2002 to 2014.

### **US support of the Afghan state**

From the American point of view, the Afghan project in early 2003 appeared modest. The pursuit of al Qaeda and its allies remained the first priority. The key to erecting an effective Afghan state was the execution of the Bonn process and the fulfillment of Europe's governance and development commitments. As the United States soon discovered, the Taliban resurgence in the south and east upset these plans to complete an orderly restoration.

The Afghan economy will slow dramatically as the foreign spending associated with the Western troop presence declines. While the US and the international community have long supported economic development, donors may become less willing to underwrite these projects if the political order frays. According to the 2014 World Bank analysis, the withdrawal of troops and associated spending will halve Afghanistan's growth prospects, reducing projected GDP growth rates to 4.8 percent per annum through 2025. With the Afghan budget running at four times the level of domestic revenues, Afghanistan will remain heavily dependent on foreign donors for the foreseeable future [4].

US support will determine the staying power of the Afghan state and its armed forces. Here the early news is mixed. Starting in 2011, the administration and the ISAF command began discussing a range of options for an American "enduring presence" in Afghanistan. On May 27, 2014, President Obama announced a steep, post - 2014 draw down from 32,000 in the summer of 2014 to 9,800 at the beginning of 2015, 5,000 at the end of 2015. In March 2015, with violence mounting in Afghanistan and pressure increasing from US military advisors and Afghan president Ashraf Ghani, the administration grudgingly agreed to slow its own troop drawdown and maintain 9,800 US troops through the end of 2015. In October 2015, President Obama postponed the final drawdown yet again, promising to keep 9,800 troops in the country for most of 2016 and a minimum of 5,500 at year's end. At the same time, the United States agreed to forgo planned cuts in security assistance so as to maintain an ANSF of 352,000 through the end of 2017 [5].

The debate about the scale and duration of the train-advise-assist mission will likely continue under a succeeding administration. If and when US advisors are withdrawn, US influence over the ANSF will fall dramatically. While President Ghani dodged a crisis by signing the Bilateral Security Agreement, which established a legal framework for US operations after 2014, the Obama administration has



continued to signal its desire to withdraw US forces and scale back counterterrorism operations. While the military and the Afghans have lobbied for a larger residual force, the administration has stuck to its timeline even as the ISIS advance in Iraq and Syria has highlighted the risks of complete withdrawal. Only time will tell whether the administration's commitment to a time-based transition and a zero option proves a shrewd reallocation of US resources or an invitation to renewed civil war.

The most encouraging element of US policy has been the stated willingness to honor its commitments on ANSF funding. So long as these funds continue to flow, the ANSF will be able to pay salaries and maintain its cohesion. Absent such funds, most fear that the ANSF would dissolve much as the Najibullah regime's forces did in 1992 after Soviet funding stopped. Even so, the current US policy suggests that the ANSF will have to face its coming challenges funded but alone.

As the collapse of the Iraqi security forces in the summer of 2014 has demonstrated, modern equipment, past US training and financial support may be insufficient to ensure the survival of client forces once advisors have been withdrawn. If this occurs in Afghanistan, it should surprise no one, for the ISAF commander, Marine General Joseph Dunford, warned Congress of this specific outcome in March 2014: "If we leave at the end of 2014, the Afghan security forces will begin to deteriorate. The security environment will begin to deteriorate, and I think the only debate is the pace of that deterioration."

The survival of the Afghan state will also depend on the actions of its enemies. The Taliban, their coalition partners, and their external sponsors will have choices to make in the wake of US withdrawal.

In principle, the American tragedy of excessive ambition, frustration, and despair was avoidable. But such a strategy would have required a compromise on one of two rival motives: the evangelical American desire to improve Afghanistan and the countervailing impulse to limit US entanglements. While the Taliban were in retreat, this trade-off receded, and it was possible to imagine an inexpensive victory against al Qaeda and the construction of a modern, Afghan political order. Once the Taliban returned, the tension between expansive goals and the finite American appetite for civil war produced an escalating stalemate. As that war intensified, American leaders had to pour more troops and money into the project. At the same time, those leaders were reluctant to abandon the ennobling aspects of state-building for fear of confronting the sordid reality of a mafia war. In the words of one American officer, "We paid a high price for a clean conscience."

Even as the instability of the new political order became apparent, its foreign architects were reluctant to reengineer it.

The United States could have curtailed its ambitions for the new Afghan order and relied instead on co-opting national and regional leaders. Such a strategy would have been cheaper but sordid and open-ended. Accommodating warlords and building a sizable but relatively primitive Afghan army might have filled the security vacuum of the 2002–2005 period and forestalled the Taliban return. But such a structure would still have remained vulnerable to Pakistani escalation and the almost irresistible temptation to improve Afghan society. Better by far to embark on an ennobling if improbable quest; after all, it is the Afghans who will pay the bill at closing time.

## Conclusion

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 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.



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