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# LESSONS LEARNED IN AFGHANISTAN

## A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT

Dov S. Zakheim

IT will be some time before the United States, its NATO allies, and other partners that contributed troops and/or resources to the effort to rebuild Afghanistan will be in a position to assess all the implications of the failure of that effort. What follows, therefore, is a preliminary assessment that no doubt will have to be modified to some extent as more facts emerge to explain why an operation that bore so much promise in the first years of the new century turned out to be such a spectacular disappointment two decades later.

Perhaps the first indication that all was not well with what was called Operation Enduring Freedom was the failure to capture Osama bin Laden. The leader of al-Qaida managed to escape from Tora Bora in December 2001 because fewer than 100 American commandos were on the scene with their Afghan allies while calls for reinforcements to launch an assault fell on deaf ears. So too did requests

for American troops to block bin Laden's escape route to Pakistan. As a result, he and his bodyguards simply walked out of Tora Bora and were able to hide in Pakistan's tribal area in order to continue their fight against the West. The episode highlights the dangers of over-emphasizing initial success before an operation is truly complete.

Early in 2003 Washington launched its ill-fated attack on Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Unlike its attack on the Taliban, it did so without the support of several key allies, notably France, Germany, and Canada. Like the initial phases of the Afghanistan operation, Operation Iraqi Freedom was a smashing success. Yet even before America and its coalition were bogged down in Iraq, the very move to launch a second war undermined the likelihood of success in Afghanistan. Key American civilian officials and top military personnel refocused their

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*Members of the Taliban enjoying the fruits of Kabul's reconquest, 20 September 2021*

Photo: Guiliver Image/Getty Images

attention from Afghanistan to Iraq, and with that shift in focus came a shift in resources as well. By relegating Afghanistan to the back burner, Washington enabled the Taliban to regroup in their Pakistani hideaway.

Even as it shifted focus from Afghanistan, Washington engaged in yet another of its many attempts at nation-building. This effort fared no better than its previous undertakings in places like Haiti, Somalia, or the Balkans. The nation-building enterprise called for what is termed a "whole of government approach." Yet all too often it was left to America's armed forces to lead the

effort by default, a task for which they simply are not suited. Other government agencies often simply did not have sufficient numbers of trained and experienced personnel to undertake the multiplicity of tasks that nation-building demanded. On the other hand, military service personnel were unfamiliar with local culture and mores. Their ignorance at times resulted in engendering hostility among the very people they were meant to support. Troops and their senior officers rotated in and out of Afghanistan far too often to obtain a deep understanding of the country or, for that matter, to develop serious relationships with its people.



As a result, they had difficulty developing any real traction with the people of Afghanistan.

Successive administrations acted on the premise that Afghanistan could be transformed from a feudal soci-

ety that had remained virtually unchanged for centuries into a modern state. The unpleasant reality that Washington and its allies refused to accept was that what they viewed as progress, conservative Afghans—particularly in the countryside—considered to be a threat to their way of life. The results have

improved tragic. In particular, whatever progress women had made over the course of two decades was shattered in a matter of weeks by a Taliban government determined to restore male dominance over all facets of life in Afghanistan.

Prior to 9/11, George W. Bush had made clear his distaste for nation-building. His successor, Barack Obama, argued for “nation-building at home.” Obama’s successor, Donald Trump, was of a similar view, as is current U.S. president Joe Biden today. One would hope that America finally learns that other nations may well be better suited to the complicated enterprise that is nation-building.

The failure of “whole of government” to function properly also was a major factor in the chaos that ensued at Hamid Karzai International Airport during the final days of the American withdrawal. The linkup between the military operating inside

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the airport and at its entrance and the State Department personnel who functioned outside the airport was tenuous at best. Instead, successful cooperation depended heavily on selfless efforts by some officials from both the State Department and the Department of Defense took the initiative to as-

sist Americans and Afghans desperate to leave the country. It is therefore high time that “whole of government” no longer remain a buzzword but rather, and at long last, become standard operating procedure for the United States government.

Washington provided far too little careful oversight of the many contractors that operated in support of the American and Afghan forces. As long as a decade ago, it was clear that the fault lay not with the contractors, but with the United States government. I served on the Commission on Wartime Contracting in Iraq and Afghanistan, which the U.S. Congress had mandated

in 2008 and that reported its findings three years later. Initially, a few of my fellow commissioners were inclined to blame the contractors for whatever waste or fraud that the Commission would unearth. As we investigated the situation on the ground in both countries over the course of nearly two years, we found that the government itself

was primarily at fault for waste that we estimated totaled anywhere from \$31 to \$60 billion (equivalent to approximately 37 to more than 71 billion in fiscal year 2021 dollars) as a result of poor government oversight, unclear specifications, mindless automatic contract renewals, and lack of transparency into subcontractor costs.

One example of the Commission’s findings foreshadowed the ultimate collapse of Afghan security a decade later. The Commission reported that “between FY 2006 and FY 2011, Congress appropriated \$38.6 billion, an average of \$6.4 billion a year, to the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A) program to train, equip, and provide other support for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Such costs far exceed what the government of Afghanistan can sustain.” The Commission could not identify where the monies had actually gone.

Reports that the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction published subsequent to the Commission’s findings highlighted additional wasted funds. Indeed, shortly before the collapse of President Ashraf Ghani’s government in Kabul, the Special Inspector General published yet another report that stated that Wash-

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ington had spent \$83 billion over the past 20 years to build the ANSF. How much of that massive sum went to waste has yet to be determined. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the U.S. government’s mismanagement of its contractors and contracts ate away at its efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and restructure its military. Equally undeniable is the fact that many if not most of the recommendations that both the Commission and the Special Inspector General put forward for at least a decade, and to which the Department of Defense paid lip service, never were implemented.

Moreover, contractors never really handed over to Afghans the responsibility for maintaining and supporting the many weapons and weapons systems that the United States had transferred to the Afghan National Defense Forces over the course of two decades. Washington never insisted on any timetable for contractors to complete their training and

maintenance missions so as to enable the Afghan forces, and especially the air forces that were so critical to keeping the Taliban at bay, to operate on their own. As a result, when American forces departed from Afghanistan in August 2021, the Afghan military personnel were unable to operate many of the systems that they had acquired. In particular, Afghan inability to support flying operations effectively grounded the Afghan Air Force, which probably constituted the most powerful capability that the Kabul government could marshal against the Taliban.

Here, too, there is a lesson to be learned. Not only should the U.S. Government tighten its contracting procedures, but it should also ensure that contractors do not permanently retain a monopoly on the support and maintenance of systems that Washington transfers to its allies. In particular, the government should insert into its contracts deadlines by which time contractors should have fully trained allies that receive American equipment. These contracts should explicitly state that failure to execute such a requirement would result in what is termed “termination by default,” meaning that the contract

would be cancelled with no resulting government liability for doing so.

By 2011, it also was clear that the Afghan government was riddled with corruption. The withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan and

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the Taliban’s lightning victories initially in its attacks on the various provincial capitals and then on Kabul itself underscored the impact of corruption on the collapse of the Afghan National Defense and the consequent fall of the Afghan government. Afghan military morale had plummeted as troops went months without pay, without

basic essentials, and even without food. And the lower ranks were fully aware that their seniors were embezzling funds and supplies.

Moreover, the corruption at the level of both the government in Kabul and various provincial governments was an open secret. American political and military leaders had been given due warning for more than a decade. The reports of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan noted scandal after scandal. Some made headlines, like the 2010 Kabul Bank scandal. Others received far less publicity but were no less

secret. For example, it did not require intelligence agencies to track where huge sums of American aid money, or, for that matter, illicit drug money, were going. For years it was widely known that senior Afghan leaders, among them some of the most senior ministers, had siphoned off funds that they employed to acquire estates in Dubai, in particular, and other similar places.

As Sarah Chayes, a journalist who spent a decade in Afghanistan has reported, the Obama Administration made a deliberate choice to focus on nation-building and to ignore the real-

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ity that corruption ultimately would undermine not only its reconstruction efforts but also the fighting capacity of the Afghan forces. Four decades earlier, American administrations overlooked the analogous reality that South Vietnamese government corruption had undermined its military’s morale and willingness to fight. America repeated the same mistake in Afghanistan; it should not do so again.

In perhaps what was one of Washington’s gravest errors, the Trump Administration chose to negotiate with a non-state actor—the Taliban—while excluding the legitimate Afghan government. It was always questionable why it elected to do so. It is difficult to accept

assertions that there was an arrangement whereby the Kabul government would be brought into the negotiations at a later date. Washington’s manifest over-eagerness to leave the country simply led to its capitulating to the Taliban’s refusal to deal directly with the Kabul government. In so doing, America permanently undermined the government’s credibility with its own people. It is a

mistake that Washington should not repeat.

The Biden Administration’s chaotic exit from Afghanistan involved numerous errors, some of which also provide lessons for the future. To

begin with, it misled itself into believing that the Taliban would abide by the terms of the Trump-negotiated February 2020 Doha agreement, which it had advertised as the first step in a process that would lead both to American and NATO withdrawal of their forces and a settlement between the Taliban and the Afghan Government. The agreement was an awful piece of negotiation. It was lopsided in favor of the Taliban, which was not even a state and was referred to in the agreement as “the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban.” For its part, the United States committed itself to withdrawing all its forces from Afghanistan and closing all Coalition bases in that

country within 14 months, that is, by the beginning of May 2021. It promised to reduce its forces in Afghanistan to 8,600 and, together with its allies, to withdraw from five military bases by mid-June 2020. Finally, in what the agreement termed “a confidence-building measure” it provided that “up to five thousand (5,000) prisoners of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and up to one thousand (1,000) prisoners of the other side will be released by March 10, 2020, the first day of intra-Afghan negotiations.”

For its part, the Taliban did not commit to very much. Its primary undertaking was to engage in “intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations.” These negotiations were never serious, however. The Taliban had no incentive to cooperate with a government that it had refused to recognize and deeply despised. Washington had yielded to the Taliban by freezing the Ghani government—the country’s legitimate and internationally recognized government—out of both the negotiations and the agreement. As some sort of consolation prize, Washington promised to bring the government into the discussions at some unspecified future date. It was hardly surprising that ordinary Afghans could only conclude

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that Washington had *de facto* recognized the Taliban and at the same time had ignored what was meant to be its ally and the legitimate government in Kabul. The result was Taliban anticipation of victory and a demoralized Afghan military.

Moreover, in a manner reminiscent of General Vo Nguyen Giap’s ultimately successful offensives against the Army of [South] Vietnam (accelerated after the seemingly successful negotiations that led to the 1973 Paris Accords), the Taliban intensified its operations against the Kabul government’s forces throughout the country in the aftermath of the agreement. Additionally, once the Afghan government under pressure from the Trump Administration released 5,000 prisoners, many of them simply rejoined the Taliban’s forces.

Despite the Taliban’s clear breach of its commitments, for some reason, however, it appears that the Biden Administration felt that it could “do business” with the Taliban. When it took office, it need not have clung to the agreement negotiated by its predecessor. The Taliban was still attacking Afghan forces. It was not negotiating in good faith. Yet Biden chose not only to adhere to the Doha Agreement, but to retain America’s negotiator, Zalmay

Khalilzad. Yet having negotiated the Doha Agreement, Khalilzad could not be expected either to seek its modification, or to renounce it. As a result, rather than renege on the Trump Administration’s deal with the insurgents, for which Washington would have been fully justified, the Biden team instead adhered to the agreement, arguing that it had little choice to do otherwise, though Biden had not hesitated to rescind numerous Executive Orders that Trump had issued on a whole host of other issues.

Washington also succumbed to a degree of self-delusion reminiscent of the Pentagon’s baseless optimism as it became increasingly clear that the Vietnam War could not be won. Even as provincial capitals were falling to the Taliban in the spring and summer of 2021, the Biden Administration seemed convinced that the Afghan government’s forces somehow would manage to hold off the Taliban at least for several months without American support. When those forces collapsed, American officials acknowledged that they had miscalculated the speed with which Afghan forces collapsed before the Taliban’s onslaught.

When Biden announced that he was extending the deadline for American withdrawal to September 11, 2021, so as to mark the completion of the twenty years’ war that had begun on that date, he did not order his subordinates to

speed up the process of extracting Americans and their Afghan allies and supporters out of the country. Biden excused his failure to do so on the grounds that his Afghan counterpart, Ashraf Ghani, had pleaded with him not to publicize an evacuation, since it would undermine Kabul’s credibility and authority. By then, however, Kabul had neither credibility nor much authority. Its forces were being soundly defeated throughout the country. Its government was widely viewed as corrupt to the core. The government’s jurisdiction barely extended beyond Kabul as provincial capitals began to fall. Yet Biden did not order a full-scale evacuation until the Taliban was at Kabul’s gates. Interestingly, France and other coalition partners that no longer had troops remaining in Afghanistan acted far more quickly to extract its own personnel from the country.

Biden Administration officials also erred in withdrawing forces from the large Bagram Air Base whose two runways would have smoothed the exodus of American and Afghan personnel in the final days of August 2021. Biden Administration spokesmen continue to insist that they could not have protected Bagram from the Taliban, since it would have taken 5,000 troops to do so—far fewer than were available throughout the country. The Biden Administration also insisted that it could not have provided protection for Americans and Afghans seeking to flee to Bagram,

since the Taliban would have targeted the roads to the airbase, which is some 36 miles from Kabul.

Both assertions are open to question, however. To begin with, testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee on September 28, 2021, General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, stated that his view was that

“we should keep a steady state of 2,500 [troops in Afghanistan] and it could bounce up to 3,500.” Similarly, General Kenneth McKenzie, commander of Central Command, told the committee that he had

also recommended that the United States retain 2,500 troops in Afghanistan to support the government’s troops. Presumably, if those forces sufficed for the entire country, they surely would have proved sufficient for protecting Bagram. Moreover, retaining Bagram would also have enabled American fighters to provide air cover to protect people seeking to flee Kabul and other parts of the country from attacks by the Taliban. And it is unclear whether the Taliban would have attempted to prevent those fleeing the country so long as it would be clear that American military forces were departing as well.

**B**iden provided his NATO allies and others who had joined the coalition to fight the Taliban little to no notice that it was withdrawing from the country

at the end of August 2021 rather than on September 11, as he had previously announced. These countries were caught flat-footed and if, like France, they had not already done so, scrambled to get their people out of Afghanistan even as Kabul was falling. As a result, it further intensified a growing concern among allies and partners about Washington’s reliability.

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The challenge that America’s friends face is that the United States appears to be undergoing a serious change for the worse. It no longer radiates the same degree of solid commitment

to preserving the international order—which it had actually constructed—as has been the case since the end of World War II. It has not been lost on foreign observers during the 2016 presidential primary campaign that the four candidates who remained in the race—Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, Ted Cruz, and Bernie Sanders—all opposed expanding America’s free trade policies, a sure sign that America was increasingly looking inward.

It was nevertheless arguable, at least during Trump’s tenure, that his isolationist impulses—withdrawing from both the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Paris Climate Accords, threatening to leave NATO, raising new tariffs barriers, and of course, pressing for America’s withdrawal from Afghanistan—were an

aberration. Yet in addition to presiding over America’s departure from Afghanistan, Biden has neither removed Trump’s tariffs nor joined the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the successor to the TPP. Trump now appears to be no more than an extreme expression of what Americans have come to feel about their country’s role in the world. And America’s allies and friends therefore are hedging their bets regarding America’s reliability, with Europeans taking greater interest in French President Emmanuel Macron’s case for “strategic autonomy” and various Middle Eastern states—Gulf Arabs and Israel alike—maintaining and in some cases intensifying their relations with China and Russia, countries that Washington now designates as its “peer competitors.”

**I**ronically, as America confronts threats from China and Russia, it does so with a far smaller force structure than it maintained during the Cold War; for that reason, it finds itself far more dependent on its allies and friends than at any time since the Revolutionary War. The Biden Administration must therefore be far more responsive to allied sensitivities. In that regard, the recent flap over the surprise cancellation of the French Barracuda conventional submarine program in favor of a new American-British-Australian effort to produce nuclear powered submarines has been less than helpful.

Finally, the exit from Afghanistan has created a vacuum that China appears quite eager to fill. Just a few weeks before the United States departed from the country, nine Taliban leaders, including Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, currently the acting first deputy prime minister of the reconstituted “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,” met in Tianjin with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at China’s invitation. Wang spoke approvingly of the Taliban, calling the group “a pivotal political and military force” in Afghanistan. Working together with its long-time ally Pakistan, which served as the Taliban’s base during the war with the United States, China clearly will be a major player, especially in the economic realm, now that the Taliban has returned to power.

This outcome represents yet another aspect of what can only be termed America’s defeat in Afghanistan. Given China’s ambition to restructure the world economic order, Washington must do all it can to avoid other mistakes that will give Beijing the economic opportunities it so doggedly seeks.

There no doubt will be many more lessons to be gleaned from a thorough review of America’s Afghan misadventure. Nevertheless, to the extent those outlined above seem likely to withstand the test of time, Washington should not hesitate to act upon them as soon as it possibly can. ●