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Issue Brief

The Afghan Quagmire and American Failure

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S*ummary*

: The geo-strategic location of Afghanistan has tempted many dominant powers to intervene but in vain as no Empire or great power has been able to occupy or attain predominance in the country. Afghanistan was not only considered a bridge to Central Asian energy resources but it provided the US accessibility to a large continental expanse to strategise and maneuver against conventional threats such as Iran, China and Russia and non-conventional threats which directly threatened American interests such as Al Qaeda, and later the Afghan Taliban and ISIS-Khorasan. However, the US failed to fulfill its geo-strategic objectives even after two decades of war and peace efforts aimed at either subduing or pacifying insurgency in the country. An attempt has been made here to examine the plausible factors that might have impeded American mission in Afghanistan.

While the Biden administration has exposed the futility of American intervention and 20 years of engagement at one stroke by withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, the previous administrations were only postponing the revelation of American failure by maintaining a level of troops and resources that was sufficient to hide its failure but were not enough for successful stabilisation programme. Afghanistan's tough geography, its historical strive for independence from occupation and desire for neutrality as well as hostile neighborhood played their part in turning the country into a graveyard for interveners again.

Inhospitable Geography and Asymmetric Warfare

The US and allied forces, much like the erstwhile USSR, became a victim of the asymmetric warfare that the hills and difficult terrain of Afghanistan facilitate. While for the intervening forces the Afghan theater provided a limited-war scenario linked with certain political outcomes, it presented a total-war scenario for the insurgents, who considered the war as the determinant of the very question of their survival.

Afghan insurgents have proved former US diplomat and politician Henry Kissinger's maxim, "The guerrilla wins if he does not lose; the conventional army loses if it does not win."¹

The insurgent group only had to conduct a protracted war of attrition and wait out the American will to stay in Afghanistan. The tactical advantages of the asymmetric war also allowed the insurgents to respond effectively to predictable attacks by leaving the area under aerial and artillery bombardment and come back after the pro-government forces had returned to their bases. On the other hand, the insurgents' unpredictable offensives dampened the patience of the government forces.

The insurgent group continued to derive support from the Pashtuns—the majority ethnic community in the country—and its radical religious prescriptions, although conflicted with modern norms of human rights, were far from alienating the society—deeply rooted in religious values—at large. Even while many people still wanted to be rid of a radical religious regime, fighting insurgencies on the ground was compounded by complexities of asymmetric warfare where the distinction between an insurgent and civilian was blurred. On several occasions, the commanders and troops on ground were puzzled as to their strategies when the enemy many times appeared to be amorphous.

¹ Robert M. Cassidy, "Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya: Military Strategic Culture and the Paradoxes of Asymmetric Conflict", *Monograph*, US Strategic Studies Institute, February 2003, p. 15.

Many in the American military establishment acknowledged that the US had turned down an early opportunity to engage the Taliban in talks and install a multi-ethnic government soon after their ouster from power.

Resources and Troops

Afghan population growth is so high that it needed an expanded and sustainable economy to absorb the youth bulge. However, the economy was dominated by massive aid and assistance and an informal and parallel opium economy. The Taliban not only earned millions of dollars a year through the opium trade, but the country also continued to subsist from the large amounts of money made from opium production, creating “600,000 full-time jobs” for its citizens. The American objective of “hitting the Taliban where it hurts, which is their finances”, as General John Nicholson had said, could not be successful without provision of an alternative and sustainable source of employment which again depended on massive per capita financial assistance. A comparative analysis between Bosnia and Afghanistan reveals the sordid statistics that while the US and other donors had provided economic assistance amounting to US\$ 1,600 per person of Bosnia per year for the first several years after that war, their assistance to Afghanistan per person was meager US\$ 50. According to Dobbins, the inadequate resources especially in Afghanistan “represented both an exaggerated confidence in the efficacy of high-tech warfare” and “an aversion to the whole concept of nation-building”.² The fact which cannot be glossed over that President George W. Bush weakened the Afghan campaign by opening another theater of war—Iraq. The US had to divert its military and financial focus away from Afghanistan, which also contributed to the ability of the Taliban to regroup and bounce back from the fringes.

On the other side, the Taliban’s control over opium production and trade allowed it a disproportionate sway in the rural areas and the group was able to run a parallel government with a continuous flow of resources, whereas Afghan government’s reach in many local areas remained non-existent.

The Afghan state was conceived more as an enabler than a provider of economic growth. International aid was tied to the global private sector, which was entrusted with the task of reconstruction, and this kept the state overly dependent on external financial support.

Furthermore, the Americans tied aid to the purchase of US-sourced products and services, and a full 70 per cent of US aid was made conditional upon US goods and

²James Dobbins, “The Costs of Overreaction”, in Brian Michael Jenkins and John Paul Godges (eds), *The Long Shadow of 9/11: America's Response to Terrorism*, Rand Corporation, Pittsburgh, 2011, p. 17.

services being purchased or employed, as Tim Bird and Alex Marshall mentioned in their 2011 book *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way*.³

Further, the weakness of the Afghan state and inefficacy of the capacity-building exercises were underlined by the fact that a major chunk of international aid was not channelled and spent through the Afghan government because of allegations of rampant corruption. This led to other players such as international consultants and private contractors getting involved, and massive aid becoming their source of income too.

Immediately following the intervention, Washington relied on local warlords to stabilise Afghanistan rather than making efforts at building a national Afghan army or police force. The problems of poppy cultivation and drug trafficking were overlooked by the US on account of its dependence on warlords.⁴ Both in security and development sectors, “there were few efforts to engage Afghanistan's tribes, sub-tribes, clans, and other local institutions”, according to Seth Jones, who worked closely with US Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan.⁵ Insincerity in American efforts and collusion with warlords led to corrupt practices which continued to sap the strength of the Afghan Army. There were reports of non-existent soldiers on the payrolls despite frequent desertions and absence—a practice that was sustained by endemic corruption in the Afghan governance system. High casualty rates within the Afghan Army led many to leave. Afghan forces were not properly prepared to fight a long war of attrition and suffered from casualties, losses and low morale. The numbers of actual soldiers were much smaller in proportion to the population of areas to be defended. Similarly, the presence of foreign troops on ground was much smaller compared to the population they had to defend. For instance, a meagre 8,000 US troops were deployed to defend 21.6 million Afghan people in 2001 whereas the success story in Kosovo just a couple of years before had revealed the ratio of boots on ground to population as a critical factor for any successful stabilisation programme.

Sense of Occupation and Alienation

Apart from the advantages of geography and the tactics of asymmetric warfare, Afghanistan witnessed gradual erosion of support for the government forces backed by the US and allied forces and swelling of the support base of the insurgents for reasons

³ Tim Bird and Alex Marshall, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost its Way*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2011, p. 135.

⁴ For details see, Vishal Chandra, “Warlords, Drugs and the ‘War on Terror’ in Afghanistan”, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 30, No.1, January–March 2006, pp. 64–75.

⁵ For details see Seth G. Jones, “Lessons from the Tribal Areas”, in Brian Michael Jenkins and John Paul Godges (eds.), *The Long Shadow of 9/11: America's Response to Terrorism*, Rand Corporation, Pittsburgh, 2011, pp. 37–45.

such as civilian casualties, unemployment and corruption. Each year, civilian casualties caused by pro-government forces kept increasing. The Taliban movement was strengthened by strategies such as tapping into nationalist feelings and creation of employment opportunities by running a shadow economy—production and trade of opium.

The Americans' hubris and belief in the superiority of their military capabilities blinded them to the complexities of asymmetric warfare in a different and complex cultural and geographical situation. Support from Tajik and Uzbek warlords was not sufficient to defeat the Taliban, who hailed from and lived with the masses from the predominant ethnic community—the Pashtuns.

Most Pashtuns live in the countryside and remained susceptible to the Taliban's narrative of fighting against foreign occupation, as the group's appeals were able to tap into Pashtun conservatism, which was embedded in the notions of national honour and pride and defending the country from foreign occupation at any costs. The insurgent group in its attempts to evoke the age-old Afghan pride in the country's honour and independence among the rural masses revived and instilled the memories as to how their efforts and struggle won their country the much-prized independence against the British Empire in the 19th century and against the Soviets in the 20th century. Oral poetry, stories and songs became the insurgent groups' mode of communication in transmitting such messages to rural people who are largely illiterate.

The Taliban's support base among the Pashtuns runs deeper than their actual number in Afghanistan. While about 40 per cent of the Afghans are Pashtuns, Pakistan is home to more Pashtuns than Afghanistan. The Durand Line separates the Pashtuns of these two countries and a significant section of Pashtuns on the Pakistani side of the border looked upon and assisted the Taliban's insurgency as a legitimate struggle for independence from foreign occupation.

The Afghan Army was dominated by ethnic groups from northern Afghanistan and encountered formidable obstacles in fighting insurgency in southern Afghanistan—the stronghold of the Taliban. Soldiers not only needed to communicate through interpreters hired for the Americans, the historical rifts between the ethnic groups in the north and south led to them being looked upon as outsiders by local residents. Drives to include Pashtuns from southern Afghanistan through enhanced quotas did not succeed.

It was not far-fetched to believe that the Afghans would appreciate each other's identity more if a sense of occupation by foreign powers were generated with the collapse of the economy accompanied by rising levels of unemployment and corruption. The Soviet invasion had already set the example as to how any foreign occupation without successful stabilisation programme could help fuse Islamic ideology with the cause of

national liberation, whereby thousands of officers and soldiers of the Afghan Army defected to the mujahideen ranks, and the insurgents seized hundreds of government outposts, most of which had been abdicated by defecting soldiers.

Afghans have a fierce sense of independence and preference for neutrality. The country had fought three wars with British imperial force and spawned Basmachi movement to preempt Russia's aggressive and strategic movement towards south to maintain its independence. It showed its interest to maintain neutrality in the world wars and joined Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). However, the US' long-term geo-political interests in Afghanistan violated these principles and the country turned into a graveyard again for the interveners.

Hostile Neighbourhood

Afghanistan is not only landlocked, but it also shares a neighborhood comprising strong regional powers, some of which carry a hostile approach towards the US for geo-political reasons. Some of these regional powers did not hesitate to put their weight behind radical religious groups with the objective of fostering their geo-political interests and undercutting American interest in Afghanistan. The US continued to depend on Pakistan's ground and air supply routes to supply goods to American forces in Afghanistan despite credible reports pertaining to the country's involvement in training and aiding the Afghan insurgents just to sustain its containment strategy towards Iran and Russia. Meanwhile, most of the regional powers including Iran, Russia and China learned the significance of maintaining contacts with the Taliban to secure their respective interests in Afghanistan. Although many countries expressed their concerns, sympathies and joined the American drive to forge a global war on terror following the 9/11 terrorist attack on twin-towers, they pursued different geo-political objectives in Afghanistan in their apparent unity to fight terrorism as they began to perceive more significant threats from the American presence and role not only in Afghanistan but also in the adjacent regions as well.

Russia enjoys dominant influence in Central Asia due to its monopoly over oil supplies; yet, it was apprehensive of American efforts at forging close ties with the states of the region in the security sphere following 9/11. It was well aware of the American ambition of diversification of oil supplies by laying down alternative pipelines—an instance of which was witnessed in the US attempts at recognising the Taliban to prop up Afghanistan as a conduit to transfer Central Asian oil to the world market. In response to the American military bases in different parts of Central Asia, Russia established its

bases, and their direct contacts remained surprisingly limited.⁶ Russia not only restricted the use of Northern Distribution Network only to maintain supplies of non-lethal goods to Afghanistan, but it also began to channelise its support towards the Taliban as a hedge against growing American influence in the region—an allegation that Russia kept denying.

On the other side, the American plan for the alternative pipeline—the TAPI pipeline—was designed to undercut Iranian influence in the region, which spurred the geopolitical struggle between the two powers.⁷ Apart from its support for Shiite religious groups in Afghanistan, Iran allegedly stepped up its efforts to train, arm and aid the Afghan Taliban in a bid to bring more instability in Afghanistan with the objective of building more pressure on the American government to roll back its policy of containment.

While Islamabad was more inclined to spread its influence in Afghanistan as part of its strategy of acquiring strategic depth against India and to attain that objective it maintained close contacts with Afghan insurgents, New Delhi considered an all-out fight against terrorism under the rubric of “War on Terror” not only as a means to reduce cross-border terrorism and militancy in Kashmir, but also to safeguard its presence and interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia as well. The Chinese interest in protecting and extending the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor as well as its concerns over Uyghur insurgency in Xinjiang province must have also led Beijing to host a Taliban delegation including Abdul Ghani Baradar, the Taliban representative in Qatar. CPEC is a part of the larger connectivity project—Belt and Road Initiative—that the US considered a geopolitical threat and criticised it on many grounds. At times, there were instances of convergence of interests among the regional powers, which stood at variance with Washington’s war and peace plan in Afghanistan. For instance, while the US was focusing more on the threat posed by the Taliban, Pakistan, Russia and China emphasised more on combating the ISIS threat. In one of the tripartite meetings in Moscow they agreed to remove specific Taliban figures from the US sanctions list.

Conclusion

In sum, it can be said that the foreign troops on ground along with the Afghan army supported by the US airpower fought against the Taliban and other jihadi groups

⁶ Tim Bird and Alex Marshall, No. 3.

⁷ Adam Tarock, “The Politics of the Pipeline: The Iran and Afghanistan Conflict”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 4, August, 1999, p. 816.

inconclusively for the last two decades. The asymmetric warfare resulted in many civilian casualties but with no visible battlefield success for the Afghan army. Afghanistan is apparently now where it was 20 years ago even after decades of rebuilding efforts. The Taliban after being able to push a superpower out of Afghan soil must have encouraged many other jihadi groups to become confident about their capabilities to fulfill their objectives. The British and Czarist Empires and later the Soviet Union and now the US have failed to achieve their desired objectives in Afghanistan. The country's impassable terrain, society deeply embedded in religious values, balance of power among external players on account of their conflicting geopolitical objectives and aversion of people towards foreign occupation turned the country into a graveyard for all great powers.

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