

Associate Paper

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Lessons from the Afghanistan Conundrum

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Key Points

- Propagandists still try to scapegoat Pakistan by raising fears of Islamabad supporting the Taliban, the deterioration of women's and children's rights and giving sanctuary to terrorists again.
- The mismatch in claimed political, military and intelligence successes and rampant corruption accompanied the hypocritical slogan of "winning hearts and minds".
- The failure to understand Afghan history, tribal culture, unfamiliar rugged terrain and an underestimation of the Taliban's faith, determination and fighting skills, combined with the rampant corruption of the Karzai and Ashraf Ghani governments, Washington's misreading of Afghan political reality and faulty technical intelligence, all led to the failure of US military plans.

Summary

The spectacular victory of the Afghan Taliban, especially that group's takeover of Kabul without firing a bullet, is indicative of the US's flaws and failures on many counts. Many analysts offer a host of reasons for the unexpected and sudden collapse of Afghanistan. Some of those explanations are unmitigated attempts at face-saving on behalf of the withdrawing forces, intelligence, military, political and diplomatic institutions, while others seek to provide new twists and create conspiracy theories.

Those efforts have come to naught, however, as the general amnesty and so far very mature handling of affairs on all fronts by the re-enthroned Afghan Taliban have stymied them. It is amusing to watch the embarrassed Indian and Western media finding it hard to cover up the

lies and foolish narratives that they spread over the last 20 years to justify a war unleashed for hypocritical reasons and objectives. Nevertheless, some of the propagandists and officials still try to scapegoat Pakistan by raising unfounded fears of a nuclear Pakistan supporting the Taliban, the erosion of women's and children's rights, the economic failure of Afghanistan and Islamabad providing sanctuary to global terrorists once again. That narrative continues despite the US's twenty long years of destruction and the deaths of thousands of innocent women, children and other civilians under the guise of collateral damage. Ironically, what is not talked about is the one greatest reasons for the failure on all fronts by the US and its allies, i.e., the corruption rampant among the invaders in connivance with their Afghan puppets who have stashed huge stocks of plundered American taxpayers' dollars abroad beyond the reach of the Financial Action Task Force.

Analysis

It is timely to examine what is being said by some invested experts about the unceremonious finale to a pointless war. As Christina Lamb recounts, she was told by a British military commander, Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, at Helmand, Afghanistan, in 2008 that the war there could not be won militarily; thirteen years on, US President Joe Biden arrived at the same conclusion. The writer of *The American War in Afghanistan*, Carter Malkasian, wonders how it could be that with as many as 140,000 soldiers situated in Afghanistan in 2011 and some of the world's most sophisticated equipment, the United States and its NATO allies failed to defeat the Taliban. Moreover, he asks why these Western powers stayed on, at a cost of more than US\$2 trillion (\$2.7 trillion) and over 3,500 allied lives lost, plus many more soldiers badly injured, fighting what the British brigadier and others knew early on was an unwinnable war. Malkasian's book raises a disturbing question: in the end, did the US intervention in Afghanistan do more harm than good?

'The United States exposed Afghans to prolonged harm in order to defend America from another terrorist attack,' he writes. "Villages were destroyed. Families disappeared. ... The intervention did noble work for women, education, and free speech. But that good has to be weighed against tens of thousands of men, women, and children who died." "There is one seductive argument made by critics of the withdrawal: that a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan will again become a haven for terrorist groups threatening the security of the United States. This argument is a backhanded acknowledgment that we succeeded in reducing the threat from Afghanistan to minimal levels - the original rationale for U.S. intervention. The sacrifice, however, was significant: more than \$2 trillion, the deaths of 2,400 U.S. service members (and thousands of contractors), more than 20,000 wounded Americans'.

What has happened in Afghanistan is a terrible tragedy, but the blame cannot be laid at any one door. The Biden Administration's short timetable for withdrawal, tied to the twentieth anniversary of 9/11, and in the middle of the fighting season, may be seen as a mistake. But the situation on the ground is the result of two decades of miscalculations and failed policies

pursued by three prior US administrations and of the failure of Afghanistan's leaders to govern for the good of their people. Many of the critics speaking out now were the architects of those policies.

The US intervention in Afghanistan, along with its long list of allies, was premised on the declared objectives of eliminating al-Qaeda, defeating the Afghan Taliban who are their supporters, introducing democratic government and rebuilding Afghanistan along Western lines ... none of those goals was to happen in two decades and the stated politico-military aims and objectives, policies and strategies kept changing and failing with the passage of time. That situation continued despite revealing annual audit reports by the US Special Inspector General on Afghanistan (SIGAR), which office always tactfully highlighted the mismatch in the political, military and intelligence pretence of successes, funds misappropriations and rampant corruption that was going around because a syndicate of Afghan élites and US officials in all the departments associated with war in Afghanistan worked hand in glove. The defence-industrial complex, narrative-building think tanks, overrated policy advisers and strategists, military contractors, money-doling intelligence operators, covert war contractors, multiple proxy runners, local warlords, drug barons and Afghan puppet political elite continued with their corruption while US forces rained bombs and missiles over hapless people. Ironically, all of that was done under the hypocritical slogan of "winning hearts and minds".

In addition to those shortcomings, it was the US's failure to understand Afghan history, tribal culture, the unfamiliar and rugged terrain, its underestimation of the Taliban's faith, determination and fighting skills, the Taliban's ability to wait out the interventionists, the local support given by many citizens to the Taliban, the abject failure of the US-funded, -trained, -equipped and greatly relied-upon Afghan National Army as well as the police force, which was mostly of no consequence and remained faithless due to the rampant corrupt practices of the Karzai and Ashraf Ghani governments, American disregard for the "eroding stalemate", Washington's misreading of a fragmented Afghan political reality and the disproportionate and cruel use of military muscle based on concocted human and faulty technical intelligence that led to the failure of all of its military plans. In particular, prematurely declaring Afghanistan as a success and turning on to Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen couldn't have been done without an overall master plan to destroy the historically-, culturally- and financially-rich Islamic countries whose rulers had provided their service to their Western sponsors and were becoming models of wealthy and stable welfare states that were now considered threat by the capitalist world. Hence, the long-hypothesised destruction of political Islam through a [Clash of Civilizations](#) just happened in the last two decades and continues unabated in different forms and in newer regions. Needless to say, in the overall larger context, the US misread the geopolitical realities of the region; the US and its allies soon found themselves confronted by strategic competitors, i.e., China and Russia and other regional countries, which Washington had not factored-in adequately in its strategic calculus. Nevertheless, those factors resulted in imperial over-stretch for the USA, and its NATO allies who became gradually disenchanted with the US's unbridled war-making due to the unbearable economic, human and political costs that resulted as a consequence of those activities.

The current US plan is to contain so-called terrorism from afar, using drones, intelligence networks, and special operations raids launched from bases somewhere in the region. William Burns, the CIA director, admitted that this plan involved 'a significant risk'. It was 'not the decision we hoped for,' said the British defence chief, Nick Carter. 'These are professional understatements', William Hague, a former British foreign secretary, wrote recently in response. 'Most Western security officials I know are horrified.' Even if the United States' war is over, Afghanistan's is not. Now, threats to withhold international recognition as the Taliban finally retook Kabul by force mean little. The Taliban leaders are not overly concerned about whether the United States and its allies recognise them as a government despite the magnanimity that they appear to have shown (to the exiting invaders' troops, diplomats, citizens, media persons, NGOs, undercover spies and their thousands of local undercover agents and helpers); other international actors probably will, no matter what Washington does. Nonetheless, such statements are indicative of the badly hurt withdrawing coalition's intentions and difficult times for which Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries will have to prepare.

The reasons and factors discussed above that contributed negatively towards an endless and futile war in Afghanistan contain many lessons and pointers for the regional countries, including Pakistan. Just as a fish rots from the head down, financial corruption and nepotism at the top political, military, intelligence, judicial and other institutional levels flow down to the lowest levels due to the lack of trust, betrayal and disillusionment with the leadership. The swarms of people fleeing Afghanistan despite the general amnesty announced by the Taliban are mostly those who preferred to serve the interventionists as translators, helpers, proxies, spies and subservient people ... no wonder that Afghanistan mostly remains in the eye of the storm. A country filled with a lot of traitors, corrupt élites, opportunists and sycophants can neither prosper nor be at peace; that is the most salutary lesson to be learned.

About the Author: Now retired from the military, Brigadier Saleem Qamar Butt is a Geostrategic Analyst for the Pakistan Television Network and, as a freelance writer, has been published by the Daily Times, The Nation, Business News Pakistan, South Asia Pulse (Canada), South Asia Magazine and Future Directions International.

In his military career, Brig. Butt graduated from the Command and Staff College, Camberley, UK (1993) and the Japanese Combined Arms Institution, Mt Fuji (1989). He commanded an infantry regiment along the Line of Control during an active conflict period, served as Chief of Operational Staff in a Corps headquarters operating along the Pakistan-Afghanistan borders and participated in the planning and execution of medium- and large-scale anti-terror operations. He has also served as an instructor in the School of Infantry and Tactics and Directing Staff at the Command and Staff College in Quetta, and as Pakistan's Defence

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