

*Afghanistan: A Failed Grand Strategy  
Between Transnational Terrorism and Foreign Intervention*

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The purpose of this article is to evaluate the prolonged US intervention in Afghanistan. In this regard, we want to examine whether American intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 and especially American prolonged involvement in the Asian country was aligned with the US national interest. We will also seek to answer a series of questions: Were there any alternatives for the earlier withdrawal of the American troops? Did the prolonged occupation of Afghanistan ameliorate the international situation regarding terrorism? Is the transnational terrorism threat reviving again because of the American withdrawal and that of the other aligned NATO troops? Will the Taliban cut ties with Al-Qaeda? We will seek to answer and shed light on the aforementioned questions with the help of international relations theory and strategic studies.

### What Happened: The Historical Perspective

Afghanistan is the “graveyard of the empires” as Seth G. Jones has elaborated in his book,<sup>1</sup> a statement that seems to be validated again by the failure of American Grand Strategy to control the military and political developments in the country. Before the Americans, the Russians under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev invaded the Asian country in 1979 in order to save the communist regime from Islamic insurrection and prevent an Islamist, anti-communist axis, comprised of Islamic countries such as Iran and Pakistan.<sup>2</sup>

The invasion was condemned by the UN, but what must be stressed at this point is American President Carter’s strong reaction who announced punitive measures against USSR.<sup>3</sup> As it is well known, the American administration supported the insurgents against the Russian troops. The aim of this strategy in international relations is called “bloodletting” to “make sure that any war between one’s rival turns into a long and costly conflict that saps their strength.”<sup>4</sup> Almost two decades later, the Americans would make the same mistake of drowning in their post-Vietnam quagmire. As we will see below, a coherent Grand Strategy was absent, thus prolonging their involvement in Afghanistan a development against U.S. national interests.<sup>5</sup>

Let’s take things from the beginning. The devastating effects that the 9/11 attacks inflicted on American society, in both physical and psychological terms, led George W. Bush to the decision to give orders to the US Army to attack the Taliban regime that gave shelter to Al-Qaeda. In October 2001, the US supported by NATO began airstrikes against the Taliban militants and Al-Qaeda camps. In November, the regime collapsed. Immediately after in December, talks under the auspices of the United Nations took

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<sup>1</sup> Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of the Empires: America’s War in Afghanistan* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Donaldson, Joseph L. Nodge and Vidya Nadkarni, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc, 2014),p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), p. 154.

<sup>5</sup> For a full account regarding the causes that led to the US failure to control the developments in Afghanistan in a way that was in line with America’s geopolitical interests, see Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Papers, 2021).

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place in Bonn<sup>6</sup> where Afghan factions agreed on 5 December 2001 to establish a new constitution and hold elections by 2004. In June 2002, Hamid Karzai was appointed interim prime minister.

At first sight, the job was done very quickly. The Taliban were overthrown, and Al-Qaeda fighters escaped and fled across the border into Pakistan's territory and therefore were no longer the kind of threat that led to the 9/11 attacks. Nevertheless, US troops stayed in the country for two decades, the most prolonged war in American history. Four American presidents involved in the conflict were not able to elaborate a coherent strategic plan with exact strategic objectives. It is useful to underscore that according to official sources in Washington, everyone expected that the whole scheme would last a maximum of two years.<sup>7</sup>

However, this was not the case. In the absence of a coherent Grand Strategy and blurred strategic objectives between defeating the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and spreading an American-style liberal democratic peace in the county, the strategic outcome could not be concisely predicted and the American national interest was undermined. On top of that, Bush decided to invade Iraq in March 2003 on the grounds that it retained weapons of mass destruction, an accusation that never proved to be real.

In 2005, Karzai visited Washington. Bush agreed to equip and train the Afghan security forces.<sup>8</sup> The same year the Taliban threat against the Karzai government and American and NATO troops in the country resurged. In 2009 elected President Barack Obama announced that 17,000 additional troops will be sent to Afghanistan<sup>9</sup> in order to stabilize the country and prevail over the Taliban insurgency.<sup>10</sup> In 2011, the American President announced that he will begin withdrawing troops. However, time lapsed and

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<sup>6</sup> Peter I. Hahn, *Crisis and Crossfire: The United States and the Middle East since 1945* (Washington, D.C: Potomac Books, 2005), p. 121.

<sup>7</sup> Craig Whitlock, *Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), p. XII.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Megerian "A timeline: America's war in Afghanistan since Sept. 11, 2001," *Los Angeles Times*, 31 August 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2021-08-31/u-s-military-operations-in-afghanistan-timeline>

<sup>9</sup> For Barack Obama's so called "surge" see, Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), chap. 24, kindle.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed analysis about Obama's strategy in Afghanistan, see Coll, chap 23, Kindle.

Obama left office without a full withdrawal citing the precarious security situation in Afghanistan.

In the meantime, America's arch-enemy, Osama Bin Laden, was killed by US Special Forces on 2 May 2011, in Abbottabad town, Pakistan. Was this a missed opportunity for the Americans and their allies to leave behind the Afghanistan quagmire? A country that was not geopolitically important, neither for the American foreign policy, nor for the American national interest. We will examine below this fold of events.

### **Moving towards a Peace Deal with the Taliban**

Trump assumed the presidency in 2017 was in favour of removing all American troops from Afghanistan. However, as he pointed out, this would have to be done gradually in order to avoid security vacuums that the terrorists would fill. In January 2019, he ordered US officials to begin talks with the Taliban in Qatar. The Afghan government was excluded from the talks because of the Taliban's refusal based on their argument that they do not recognize Afghanistan.

Zalmay Khalilzad, a diplomat who served in Afghanistan and a top US negotiator announced an agreement with the Taliban. In February 2020, a full agreement has been reached<sup>11</sup> that provided for the full withdrawal of American troops from Afghan soil by 1 May 2021. The essential part of the deal concerns American national security. This was from the very beginning the primary reason for the American involvement in Afghanistan. More specifically, what is underlined is the Taliban's obligation "not allow any of its members, other individuals or groups, including Al-Qaeda, to use the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the United States and its allies."<sup>12</sup> Was this deal the best one that could be secured? Are the American or the West's interests safeguarded? As we will see below the whole deal is ineffective and unfortunately, it creates the conditions that will spark international

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<sup>11</sup> "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America," 29 February 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.3.

terrorism. Joe Biden's election as the new American President gave him full authority to implement the deal with the Taliban.

In the meantime, violence between the Taliban and the Afghan forces continued. Khalilzad was criticized by many for reaching a bad deal that did not provide neither a "ceasefire" with the Taliban nor a context for a future lasting peace agreement, allowing the Taliban to fill in the gap of American withdrawal and by 15 August 2021 capturing the capital of Kabul.<sup>13</sup> Why did the Americans stay in Afghanistan for 20 years spending both human and material capital? Thousands of lives were lost and approximately two trillion dollars? What for? To establish the adverse conditions for the status quo ante, an Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan? This is not a failed Grand Strategy?

### **A failed American Grand Strategy for Afghanistan?**

According to strategic studies, strategy unfolds in two dimensions:<sup>14</sup> the *horizontal* contention of the adversaries who seek to oppose, deflect and reverse each other actions in peace and war and the vertical interplay of the different levels of conflict (tactical, operational, strategic) among which there is no natural harmony. What is Grand Strategy then? Grand Strategy is the highest level of strategy which encompasses all the constituent elements (diplomacy, economy, military strategy, political and international legitimization of state's objectives) that are employed in peace and war in order to promote the interests of the state. The whole American *experiment* in Afghanistan seems to be characterized by blurred objectives and by the absence of a clear strategic goal.

Why did the Americans invade Afghanistan? To decapitate Al-Qaeda and eliminate her ability to carry out deadly attacks against the US and its allies? To topple the Taliban regime that gave sanctuary to Al-Qaeda? Regime change was not necessarily an objective but at the same time was not ruled out.<sup>15</sup> What remains an undeniable fact is that the Taliban regime collapsed in a few weeks and Al-Qaeda

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<sup>13</sup> "US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and the Taliban's rise," *AlJazeera*, 23 August 2021,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/23/us-envoy-zalmay-khalilzad-and-the-talibans-rise>

<sup>14</sup> Edward NLuttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (London: Harvard University Press, 1987), Preface, p. 70.

<sup>15</sup> Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, p. 8.

militants have dispersed finding sanctuary in Pakistan's northern Baluchistan Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. There, they regrouped, rearmed, and re-attacked the US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. However, they did not constitute a principal threat either for the US territory or for Afghanistan as their operational capabilities were undermined a lot, despite Osama bin Laden's escape.

But after all, why did the Americans engage in a long-lived involvement that entailed nation-building? Which was their objective? To spread democracy? To strengthen the Afghan forces in order to be able to defend themselves against their foes the Taliban? Both were unsuccessful. Events speak for themselves. In ten days, the Afghan army collapsed,<sup>16</sup> and Afghanistan has not become a Western type of democracy but an Islamic Emirate, as it was during the period between 1996-2001. There were signs for several years that the Taliban were gaining power, while the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) displayed critical deficiencies. However, the American administration ignored them. Neither the Americans nor the Afghan government detected precisely all those flows in order to adjust their political strategy and find tangible solutions to them. Regarding the lack of clear objectives by the Americans and the continuous stalemate, we may resort to American military officials with direct knowledge of the events as they unfolded both on the level of Grand Strategy and the level of military strategy. "There was no campaign plan. It just wasn't there," Army General Dan McNeil admitted.<sup>17</sup> "There was no coherent long-term strategy" pointed out another British General who led US and NATO forces from 2006 to 2007, adding that there was an effort to develop a coherent long-term approach and a proper strategy, but the result was a lot of tactics.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, since the political leadership could not define a clear strategic objective from the very beginning, possibly everything could go in the wrong direction. It is not illogical to claim that the strategic and tactical situation in Afghanistan was

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<sup>16</sup> All the problems (poor morale, desertion, attrition, corruption, ethnic factionalism and overreliance on backup from Afghan special operation forces, 7 percent of the ANDSF) that allowed the Taliban to defeat the army so quickly were on display in 2015 when the militant group temporarily seized Kunduz a provincial capital in northern Afghanistan. See, Vanda Felba-Brown "Why the Taliban Won And What Washington Can Do About It Now," *Foreign Affairs*, 17 August 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/why-taliban-won>.

<sup>17</sup> Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, p. XV.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

doomed to fail. According to the theory of strategic studies, one of the criteria used for the evaluation of grand strategy is to be able to properly match the capabilities with the goals.<sup>19</sup> Since there was no coherent long-term strategy one understands that this criterion could not fulfill and therefore undermined the whole effort to stabilize the Asian country. More tragically, as we will see below it led to an overextended strategy<sup>20</sup> leading to failure.

The complete failure in Afghanistan does not guarantee that the Taliban will not permit terrorist elements to exploit the country against the US and their Western allies. With the knowledge and general insight that we have now, we can judge that the nation-building strategy was wrong<sup>21</sup> and implemented incorrectly. More specifically, even if we assume that the American administration should carry out nation-building in Afghanistan this was not based on functional and clear pillars. More specifically, a proper and functional sub-strategy for properly matching the economic means with their political objectives was absent.

Instead, the American administrations were throwing millions of dollars at the problem without knowing where the money was going. More tragically, the Americans were refuelling the corruption - with what this generates, fraud, bribery, etc., in the country. According to a top U.S. diplomat in Kabul “corruption”<sup>22</sup> became so widespread that it presented a bigger threat to the U.S. mission than the Taliban.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the US undermined its own economic strategy as an important component of Grand Strategy.

### **The regional implications and the threat of reviving transnational terrorism**

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<sup>19</sup> Charalambos Papatotiriou, *Byzantine Grand Strategy* (Athens: Poiotita Publications, 2000), p. 34.

<sup>20</sup> For strategic overextension in international politics, see: Constantinos Koliopoulos, *Strategic Thought: From the Antiquity to the present* [in Greek] (Athens: Poiotita Publications, 2008), p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Gates, the American Foreign Minister of Defense (2006-2011) said that Bush administration’s democratic aspirations and nation-building agenda for Afghanistan “were a pipe dream” that would take generations to fulfill.” See: Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, p. 104.

<sup>22</sup> Diana Magnay, “Afghanistan: ‘Corruption from day one’ - Afghan colonel now in hiding on who he blames for return of the Taliban,” *Sky News*, 31 August 2021, <https://news.sky.com/story/afghanistan-corruption-from-day-one-afghan-colonel-now-in-hiding-on-who-he-blames-for-return-of-the-taliban-12394903>

<sup>23</sup> Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, p. 184.

At the regional level, first and foremost, the country that was most affected by the Taliban's rise in Afghanistan is Iran. Having a 900 km border and peculiar political intercourse over the years with the Taliban, Tehran<sup>24</sup> cautiously detected the new status quo. While, in recent years, it supported the Afghan government publicly, at the same time it hosted some representatives of the Taliban.<sup>25</sup> Tehran knows quite well that the Taliban represent a violent manifestation of Sunni Islam that contradicts Iran's Shiite version of the Islamic faith. In Afghanistan, there are over 8 million people that belong to the Hazara minority, practicing Shia Islam. Hazaras are one of the most oppressed ethnic groups in the country. Therefore, Tehran will watch very carefully their treatment by the Taliban regime.

From a geostrategic point of view, if the Taliban display an anti-Shia policy, it might bolster its relations with Saudi Arabia, a country in full strategic competition with Iran for regional hegemony. Moreover, there are concerns that the Taliban may use Afghan territory as a bastion for anti-Iran terror groups.<sup>26</sup>

Another state that is much concerned with the political situation is Pakistan. A state that has a 2.670 km border with Afghanistan and a long political interplay with the jihadist elements in Afghanistan in general. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) supported the Mujahedeen against the Soviets in the 1980s and continued when the Taliban governed the country (1996-2001). However, it also displayed a suspicious double policy supporting, on the one hand, the US and their allies against the War on Terror and, on the other hand, offering military and logistic support to the Taliban.

What are the objectives of Pakistan regarding Afghanistan? As former Pakistani President, Pervez Musharaf has put it "Pakistan needs strategic depth in Afghanistan to ensure that is a friendly regime on Pakistan's western border."<sup>27</sup> Former Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan did not hide his pleasure when the Taliban took over Kabul

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<sup>24</sup> When the Taliban conquered Mazar-e-Sharif (a city, northwest of Afghanistan) in 1998 they killed Iranian diplomats. After the atrocity, Tehran mobilized 200,000 troops for an invasion. G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, chronology, kindle.

<sup>25</sup> Golnaz Esfandiari, "Iran Treading Cautiously Amid The Taliban Takeover Of Afghanistan," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 18 August 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-taliban-iran-reaction/31417187.html>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Jones, *In the Graveyard of the Empires*, p. 87.



saying that the Taliban “were breaking the chains of slavery.” We can understand Pakistan’s ambiguous policy on Afghanistan due to the domestic threat against the country’s sovereignty, posed by the large Pashtun minority living in North Pakistan and separated from Afghanistan on the border with the Durand Line. Pakistan’s government considers the Taliban’s religious ideology stronger than national separatist feelings and therefore believes that the group’s religious nationalism will hold the region from seceding as part of a “Pashtunistan.”<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, another strategic concern for Islamabad is to ensure that any government in Afghanistan is not pro-India.<sup>29</sup> The fact that the Taliban themselves aimed to replace former President Ghani - considered by them as “pro-India”<sup>30</sup> with one who is “pro-Pakistan” - shows the identification of interests between Pakistan and the Taliban.

Let’s turn our attention to the emerging terrorist threat that emanates from Afghanistan. There are already over 10,000 foreign fighters and over 2000 members of the Islamic State of Khorasan (IS-K) in the country.<sup>31</sup> The latter is more radical than the Taliban and has clashed with them multiple times. They are responsible for the death of 13 US troops and several other Afghan citizens during the suicide bombing attack at the airport on 26 August 2021.

The American and NATO troops’ withdrawal creates legitimate concerns that the security vacuum might be filled by terrorists. The security challenges for Washington and the West are reviving again. At the same time, while the Taliban will likely ask Al-Qaeda to restrict its actions to show that they honour the February 2020 agreement with the US, one must be aware that the relations between the two radical groups remain

<sup>28</sup> Manjari Chatterjee Miller, “Pakistan’s Support for the Taliban: What to Know,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, 25 August 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/article/pakistans-support-taliban-what-know>.

<sup>29</sup> James Landale, “Afghanistan: What rise of Taliban means for Pakistan,” *BBC News*, 3 September 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58443839>.

<sup>30</sup> Abhinandan Mishra, “Taliban eye replacing ‘pro-India’ Ghani in Kabul,” *Sunday Guardian*, 7 March 2020, <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/taliban-eye-replacing-pro-india-ghani-kabul>.

<sup>31</sup> “Operation Freedom’s Sentinel Lead Inspectors Quarterly Report to the United States Congress,” 1 April 2021- 30 June 2021, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Aug/17/2002832926/-11/1/LEAD%20INSPECTOR%20GENERAL%20FOR%20OPERATION%20FREEDOM%E2%80%99S%20SENTINEL%20I%20QUARTERLY%20REPORT%20TO%20THE%20UNITED%20STATES%20CONGRESS%20I%20APRIL%202021,%202021%20-%20JUNE%202021.PDF>

cordial. In this regard, intelligence reports indicate that Al-Qaeda will rebuild and manage to attack the US homeland.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, American experts maintain that the security situation in Afghanistan is much more dangerous than it was in 1999 and 2000.<sup>33</sup> More specifically, Al-Qaeda's members in the Asian country have increased from 400 fighters before 9/11 to 600 before the Taliban takeover.<sup>34</sup>

Several months after the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, events on the ground seem to justify American concerns. As experts of Chatham House think tank in London point out,<sup>35</sup> "The recent killing of Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri in a US drone attack (31 July 2022) drew international attention to the Taliban's inability or lack of willingness – perhaps both – to break with Al-Qaeda." US and UN warnings that the Taliban and Al-Qaeda "remained close" are validated by the fact that Al-Zawahiri was residing in the heart of Kabul's luxurious diplomatic neighbourhood in a house that is reportedly owned by a top aide of the de facto regime's interior minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani – himself the subject of a \$10 million US bounty.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, the Taliban takeover has inspired jihadists and foreign fighters and therefore we must not exclude the possibility that Syrian jihadists<sup>37</sup> and Salafist fighters from Central Asian Republics, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, could make their way to Afghanistan as a newly established safe haven.<sup>38</sup> Political instability in pariah and impoverished states with fragile political, social, and economic structures runs as a magnet for the extremists.

Unfortunately, the UN's warnings about the current situation in Afghanistan regarding terrorism are in no sense optimistic. Csaba Korosi, the President of the UN's General Assembly said: "that the Asian country remains awash of heroin and opium,

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Robin Wright, "Afghanistan, Again, Becomes a Cradle for Jihadism—and Al Qaeda," *The New Yorker*, 23 August 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/afghanistan-again-becomes-a-cradle-for-jihadism-and-al-qaeda>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Hameed Hakami-Gareth Price, *Afghanistan: One year of Taliban Rule*, Chatham House, 15 August 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/08/afghanistan-one-year-taliban-rule>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> In Idlip Syria an al-Qaeda offshoot (Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham) praised the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan. See: "Are Syrian jihadis ready to take the fight to Afghanistan?" *Al Monitor*, 27 August 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/are-syrian-jihadis-ready-take-fight-afghanistan>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

underlining that the threat from drug trafficking is linked with the threat of terrorism, regional and global security.”<sup>39</sup> He also urged the Taliban leaders to engage in serious dialogue about counter-terrorism to reverse the flow of foreign extremists into the country – and prevent their own from becoming foreign terrorist fighters elsewhere. He stressed that Afghanistan must never again become a breeding ground and safe haven for terrorists.<sup>40</sup>

It is useful at this point, to present Al-Qaeda’s terrorist strategy. Most jihadi terrorist organizations -see for example ISIS jihadi strategy- tend to agree with the so-called *The Management of Savagery*. This strategy has three pillars-phases:<sup>41</sup>

The first includes terrorist attacks to weaken the international and regional order. The second, as government authority erodes or collapses, is to prevent other political forces from filling the vacuum. The final stage is to establish a state and stitch the other regions together into a caliphate.

### **Liberal democratic peace vs neoclassical realism: The Afghanistan paradigm**

As presented above, the dilemmas and strategic threats that are unfolding due to American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban’s reemergence as a political authority, are becoming complex with a high probability to pose a threat to American interests. This section focuses on the *democratic peace theory* and examines whether this approach was the most appropriate to apply in Afghanistan. Moreover, we will examine our main hypotheses through the lenses of the realist school of thought in international relations.

George Bush, in his address to the American people on 7 October 2001,<sup>42</sup> announced *Operation Enduring Freedom*, the American intervention in Afghanistan. He pointed out that the US’s primary objective was to attack al-Qaeda’s military camps and

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<sup>39</sup> “Crime and terrorism thriving again in Afghanistan amid economic ruin, warns Kőrösi,” *UN News*, United Nations, 10 November 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130447>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ali Soufan, “Geopolitics and Salafi-Jihadist strategy,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, Volume 20, (Fall 2019): pp. 94-101, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/741055>.

<sup>42</sup> “President George W. Bush’s full address announcing first U.S. strikes in Afghanistan” *PBS NewsHour*, 7 October 2001, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGXRMIP3XI>

installations of the Taliban regime that gave shelter to the terrorists. Moreover, in his address he stressed that the only way to bring about peace is to pursue those who threaten it. Referring to the people of Afghanistan, he said that the Americans are their friends and they will give food and medicine to the suppressed, women and children. He concluded his address by underscoring that peace and freedom will prevail. However, did freedom and peace prevail in Afghanistan? Twenty years later, we see that neither objective was fully fulfilled.

As Christopher Layne points out, "Policymakers who have embraced democratic peace theory, see a crucial link between America's security and the spread of democracy as the antidote that will prevent future wars."<sup>43</sup> However, as the Afghanistan paradigm showed, the whole theoretical argument is flawed. More specifically, it is extremely difficult to spread democracy to people with a very different culture, unable to be educated in democratic institutions.

As far as Afghanistan is concerned, the whole effort for nation-building through a representative government<sup>44</sup> and a cohesive army that could provide security permitting the democratic institutions to flourish failed. Moreover, the endeavour to educate the Afghan citizens was unsuccessful. Practically speaking, the collapse of the Afghan army exposes many structural problems embedded in the culture of Afghanistan.

As Craig Whitlock reveals in *Afghanistan Papers*, most of the Afghan soldiers (80 to 90 percent) could not read and write and they did not have a crucial understanding of their environment.<sup>45</sup> How did the Americans expect to teach those soldiers about complicated military systems? More tragically, according to American officials serving in Afghanistan, the country was one century behind.

Moreover, the American foreign policy did not manage to control corruption in general, but also as far as the Afghan army was concerned the whole policy was

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<sup>43</sup> Christopher Layne, "Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No 2 (Fall 1994): p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> There was no tradition in Afghanistan regarding a strong central government. Rather, the Afghans were ruled by warlords who derived their authority from their ability to pacify the contending parties. Whitlock, *Afghanistan Papers*, p. 37.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57-61.

undermined by the same means that were used to fight corruption, the cash. Money was flowing to Afghanistan without the appropriate audit checks by the American authorities. On many occasions, contractors, subcontractors, and agencies were taking percentages of the foreign aid curtailing the initial amount destined for the Afghan people.<sup>46</sup>

From the realist's or neoclassical realist's perspective, state officials, the President included, "inevitably have some conception of the national interest in the face of potential external threats."<sup>47</sup> Bush decided to invade Afghanistan and transfer the "War on Terror" to Iraq because of his perception that there was a terrorist threat in Afghanistan that threatened American national security.

However, the decision to engage in state-building continued by Barack Obama was undermining American national interest politically and economically. Therefore, the whole situation needs to be understood through the neoclassical perspective that uses not only systemic factors (relative distribution of capabilities) but also unit variables, such as the dominance of Wilsonian or liberal ideals in the foreign policy of the U.S. that epoch. Furthermore, one needs to analyze the political, military, and diplomatic establishment's perceptions about the threat assessment regarding terrorism after the overthrow of the Taliban regime. It is beyond the scope of this paper to indulge in-depth on these issues, but as we have clearly shown, it is quite understandable that there were many bad influences on foreign policy procedures that prolonged the war in Afghanistan.

In our opinion, Biden's declared strategy in late August 2021 "to counter terrorist threats with military technology that allows strikes against terrorists without having

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<sup>46</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, "Don't Blame the Afghans," *Foreign Policy*, 24 August 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/24/afghanistan-withdrawal-corruption-foreign-aid-military-diplomacy/>.

<sup>47</sup> Colin Dueck, "Neoclassical Realism and the national interest: presidents, domestic politics, and major interventions," in *Neoclassical Realism, the State and Foreign Policy*, edited by Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 146.

large contingents of troops based on the ground”<sup>48</sup> should be carried out ten or more years ago in order to disengage from Afghanistan.

### **Afghanistan: Perpetuating the Stalemate: Missed Opportunities to Break the Deadlock and Leave**

The Americans stayed in the country out of fear that if they left, Al-Qaeda could rebuild and harm again American national security by carrying out terrorist attacks. However, judging from the outcome, twenty years after, this is still unfortunately a possible scenario. Twenty years of great sacrifices both in material indicators and also in human capital. Were there any opportunities for the Americans to leave earlier and avoid the stalemate that undermined their national security and their interests? The answer is in the affirmative. In order to investigate our question, we must turn our attention to the tactical-operational level of the war in Afghanistan as some opportunities lay in this level of analysis.

In December 2001, the US lost two opportunities to end the war. At the start of the month, intelligence indicated that Osama Bin Laden and some of his fighters hid in Tora Bora, a cave complex in eastern Afghanistan, near the Pakistan border. A bombing campaign was ordered while two Afghan warlords pursued Al-Qaeda’s leader and the other jihadists. However, the warlords proved unreliable and hesitant to act and therefore the arch-terrorist escaped. A golden opportunity to bring the war to an end was missed.<sup>49</sup> One may ask, did the Americans act prudently by leaving Bin Laden’s hunt to unreliable elements? Shouldn’t they carry out themselves the operation in order to decapitate their archenemy, whose actions provoked so much pain in the US and elsewhere? A terrorist attack that changed the whole international order.

In fact, US cooperation with the warlords eroded the central government’s authority and alarmed public opinion. Afghanistan National Security Council National Threat assessment said, “Non-state armed actors pose a direct threat to the national

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Shear and Jim Tarkensley, “Biden Defends Afghan Pullout and Declares an End to Nation-Building,” *New York Times*, 31 August 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/31/us/politics/biden-defends-afghanistan-withdrawal.html>

<sup>49</sup> Whitlock, *Afghanistan papers*, pp. 23-24.

security of Afghanistan.”<sup>50</sup> There was also another incident that should be noted. The same month (December 2001) an army major heard the radio announcing that some people saw Bin Laden in his region, but while he was ready to act with his unit no one asked him.<sup>51</sup>

At this point, we must examine the political and diplomatic developments in Afghanistan and especially the Bonn Agreement that laid down the foundation stone for the beginning of a normal and democratic political procedure after the overthrow of the Taliban regime. It is an undeniable fact that many American officials considered the exclusion of the Taliban from the talks a grave mistake.<sup>52</sup> We must take into consideration that the Salafist group was defeated and humiliated and therefore weak and probably ready to accept compromises in order to participate in the newly launched political procedure.

According to Zalmay Khalilzad, Lakhdar Brahimi, the Chief UN representative at the Bonn conference and James Dobbins, a veteran U.S. diplomat who guided the Bonn conference this was a missed opportunity that could make America’s longest war its shortest.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

The US intervened militarily in Afghanistan expecting to stay in the country for two years, but they remained in their first post-Vietnam experience for almost two decades. This reminds us of the Soviet experience when the Soviets said that their intervention in 1979 would last for some weeks or months but stayed for one decade. What went wrong? All American presidents involved in the conflict neither learned from the Soviet experience there, although there were very well informed, nor they did learn from their own mistakes to adjust to the fluid and changing circumstances in Afghanistan and therefore develop a coherent exit strategy that would permit them to withdraw earlier from the Asian country.

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<sup>50</sup> Jones, *In the Graveyard of the Empires*, pp.130-131.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>52</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, p. 456.

<sup>53</sup> Jones, *In the Graveyard of the Empires*, pp. 25-27.

If they did so and acted more prudently, the American national interest but also the West's interests would better be served. As Carter Malkasian rightly observes: "Although the Al-Qaeda Leader Osama Bin Laden was killed and no major attack on the American homeland was carried out by a terrorist organization based in Afghanistan after 2001, the United States was unable to end the violence or hand the war to the Afghan authorities, which could not survive without US military backing."<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, when the Americans falsely engaged in nation-building despite their assurances they would not, they did it in the wrong way. More specifically, they did not develop a flexible and clever *sub-strategy*, as one may call it in order to deal with the tantamount handicaps that arose in this regard.

As we show in this paper, the American effort to carry out nation-building in Afghanistan was done improperly, at an amateur tempo with disappointing results. Non-essential work was done in order to combat corruption. For an insurgency to be effective and successful, it needs popular support. By not taking the appropriate measures to fight corruption, corruption was perpetuated at all levels of governance and in the army as well. This fact pushed many Afghans, who were disappointed by their government's inability to control corruption into the arms of the Taliban, strengthening in this way the political legitimacy of the Salafist group. More Afghans, proselytized by the Taliban, were willing to kill and be killed on behalf of the Taliban<sup>55</sup> and fight against the superior numbers of the Afghan army. In addition to this, the Taliban regime had gained legitimacy as a resistance armed group, because it fought against foreign occupation.<sup>56</sup>

Another grave mistake was the superpower's over-extension to Iraq which created the conditions to disregard the Afghanistan case. As Seth Jones has put it, "the invasion of Iraq ensured that Afghanistan would take a backseat in money, policy attention, and military and nonmilitary aid."<sup>57</sup> In particular, the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets were reduced and divided between Iraq

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<sup>54</sup> Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*, p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 455.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 456.

<sup>57</sup> Jones, *In the Graveyard of the Empires*, p. 126.



and Afghanistan at a ratio of 4:1.<sup>58</sup> A specific example will better illustrate what we claim: For every four predators that were shipped to Iraq, one went to Afghanistan.<sup>59</sup> Consequently, this situation reduced the US influence over the events in the country and therefore its ability to control the insurgency.

Finally, American administrations should be more cautious- and they were not- in implementing a precise Grand Strategy for Afghanistan, with a clear strategic objective from the very beginning encompassing also an exit strategy, ready to adjust to the fluid circumstances if something went in the wrong direction. They had the experience, but their political strategy missed what in strategic studies is called *appropriateness*, namely being able to adjust to changing international, but also domestic developments.<sup>60</sup> From a geostrategic point of view, Afghanistan was not a strategic asset but became a very heavy strategic liability.

Regarding transnational terrorism, as we have displayed in this paper, Taliban and Al-Qaeda ties remain close despite the Taliban's pledges. Therefore, the threat to American and Western interests remains high. Moreover, as the UN warns, Afghanistan remains a pariah state awash with narcotics and the link between narcotics and terrorism is strong. Evidence on the ground is disappointing. Al-Qaeda's members in the Asian country have increased from 400 fighters before 9/11 to 600 before the Taliban takeover. Accordingly, no one can exclude the possibility that this number is higher at the time of the writing.

In conclusion, what should be done one may ask? In our opinion, apart from the missed opportunities shown above, when the Americans understood that there was no way out, they should have planned a clear timeline of two years maximum for an exit, with or without an agreement with the Taliban. This would have sent a clear message to the Afghan politicians and the army that they could not count indefinitely on American support. Rather, they should start preparing for a clash with the Taliban by relying on their own forces. The psychological factor is very important in this regard.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> A successful Grand Strategy is adjusting to the opportunities and threats that emerge in the international system in order to exploit its comparative advantages and the comparative deficiencies of its opponents. See: Charalambos Papatotiriou, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire, 6th-11th century* [in Greek] (Athens: Poiotita Publications, 2001), pp. 33-35.

Many believe that the US should have withdrawn its forces earlier and shifted to a counterterrorism strategy, targeting the terrorist threat, namely the terrorist of Al-Qaeda. It is not accidental that John Mearsheimer, a distinguished professor at Chicago University, and a West Point graduate, said in 2009 “that the U.S. government should accept defeat and withdraw its forces from Afghanistan.”<sup>61</sup> According to our opinion victory or defeat should not be the primary American concern. The strategic stake was to avoid all those actions that harmed American interests. However, in practical terms, Mearheimer’s comments proved to be correct. If this kind of logic had been followed then, the US would have avoided the consequences that continue to undermine American national security with all the dangers that this entails.

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<sup>61</sup> John J.Mearsheimer, “Hollow Victory,” *Foreign Policy*, 2 November, 2009.

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