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Vali Nasr

**Professor of International Affairs and Middle East Studies
School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University**

The conclusion of the Afghanistan War and Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan raises important questions about what went wrong in prosecuting that war and where the military and diplomatic strategies of the United States fell short. It is important to take stock of and identify lessons we can learn to better address future national security threats.

The United States won the first phase of the war in Afghanistan in 2001 quickly and decisively. The U.S. overthrew the Taliban government, decimated its military forces, and for a notable period extricated its influence from that country. The victory, however, sowed the seeds of renewed conflict, a longer chapter in the war that would span two decades and end in summer of 2021 with Taliban's return to power.

It is important to note that by 2016, when the Trump administration took office, the critical balance in the war had shifted in the Taliban's favor. American military strategy to date had not worked. With U.S. looking to contain its involvement there, the tide of war was bound to continue to favor the Taliban, especially as the United States accelerated its troop draw down following the Doh Agreement.

An event of this magnitude owes to many decisions large and small. Furthermore, the course of the war could have turned at various junctures over the course of the past two decades. However, the confluence of a set of decisions and their consequences created a momentum towards the Taliban victory. By 2021, it was too late and too difficult to reverse these realities, detailed below:

- The United States did not follow its initial victory over the Taliban with a plan to reintegrate Taliban rank-and-file soldiers who had laid down their weapons into Afghan society and economy. As was also the case in Iraq, this disenfranchisement fed Pashtun grievances and provided a basis for the start of an insurgency.
- The United States largely assumed that its plans for Afghanistan would receive support from Afghanistan's key neighbors. However, although Iran had supported the toppling of the Taliban and cooperated with the U.S. in the Bonn Conference that produced a new constitution and government for the country, that engagement did not continue. On the other hand, Pakistan's strategic calculus did not converge with American plans. Pakistan was supportive of U.S. anti-terrorism objectives but not of establishing a strong centralized state in Afghanistan. Pakistan feared that such a state would be an ally of India

and spearhead the secession of Pakistan's Pashtun northwest. The United States assumed it had Pakistan's support but not until the insurgency was in full swing did it realize that its strategy was at odds with Pakistan's, and then the United States sought unsuccessfully to cajole Pakistan to change course. Neither Pakistan nor the Taliban were represented at the Bonn Conference, and since their voice and interests were not reflected in that agreement, they set out to overturn it. The United States found itself in the untenable situation where the country that had supported most in toppling the Taliban and creating a new state, Iran, was its enemy; and its principal regional ally was fundamentally opposed to the toppling of the Taliban and the Bonn Agreement. The United States never found a way around this dilemma.

- Soon after overthrowing the Taliban in 2001, the United States succumbed to mission creep. The goal of destroying al-Qaeda and eliminating its presence in Afghanistan metamorphosed into the mission to build a modern state and a functioning democracy in a country ravaged by decades of civil war, lacking in centralized political institutions and divided by religion, ethnicity and tribe. Whereas arguably the U.S. succeeded in decimating al-Qaeda, it is in achieving this expanded mission that it failed. Persisting in this expanded mission ineluctably mired the United States in a larger counter-insurgency war that lasted well beyond the destruction of al-Qaeda. The large sums of money that the United States poured into Afghanistan for state-building and counterinsurgency exceeded that country's capacity, and therefore quickly fueled corruption, which in turn alienated many Afghans and helped Taliban recruitment.
- The quick victory in Afghanistan in 2001 also led the U.S. to pursue another war in Iraq. The dynamics of that conflict diverted attention from Afghanistan for a critical time-period during which the Taliban reorganized and launched an insurgency. Lessons from Iraq were in turn transferred into Afghanistan, as starting in 2009-10, the U.S. embraced the "fully-resourced counter-insurgency" strategy that was credited with ending the Iraqi sectarian war as the right strategy for Afghanistan. However, that strategy was ill-suited to Afghanistan. The Taliban proved to be more tenacious fighters, embedded more deeply in Afghanistan's majority Pashtun population, protected by the country's forbidding mountains and valleys, and a protected sanctuary in Pakistan. U.S. attempt to change the dynamic by tweaking its strategy or increasing pressure on Pakistan did not have the desired impact.
- By 2012, it was clear that counterinsurgency was falling short of expectations. A greater number of troops and commitment to nation-building and local security was costly in blood and treasure but was not winning the war against the Taliban. The U.S. sought to change its strategy, looking to stand up a sizable Afghan military. Deploying Afghan troops instead of American soldiers to fight counterinsurgency had the effect of reducing U.S. casualties but did not slow the Taliban's gradual conquest of more territory. There has been a flaw in the way in which the United States envisioned an Afghan military. It was modeled too closely after U.S. military, heavily reliant upon air support and technological military material common in the U.S. military. Some of its units consisted

largely of northerners who would be viewed as occupiers by Pashtuns in the south. Its command and control were heavily dependent on U.S. military support, and that made its morale vulnerable to American decision to withdraw. Successful national militaries possess not only tactical and technical capabilities but share in an ethos, and corporate identity that must be developed over time, which the Afghan military was not given.

- By 2017, the U.S. government had decided that the Afghan war was lost; turning the tide was too difficult and expensive to contemplate or expect the American people to support. That led the United States to the Doha Agreement and direct negotiations with the Taliban. Unlike in 2009-10, when talking to the Taliban was first considered, these negotiations came at a time when the Taliban looked ascendant, and the U.S. war effort looked to be an impasse. The negotiations *in essence* focused on a cessation of hostilities between the combatant forces in Afghanistan: The United States and the Taliban; a cease-fire between the two, which did not demand that the Taliban desist from violence against Afghan targets; safe passage for United States forces out Afghanistan and finally, and a promise by the Taliban that they would allow Afghan territory to be used by Al-Qaeda or any other terrorist force against U.S. and its interests.

It is important to note that the Doha Agreement did not include the formation of an inclusive Afghan government as a requirement, and it did not provide for a U.S. residual force to stay in Afghanistan for counter-terrorism missions. It is also important to note that the U.S. approach to the Agreement brought to the fore a fundamental contradiction in how it viewed the Afghan government and Afghan security forces, which greatly contributed to their quick demise. Whereas the United States had always viewed the Afghan government as a sovereign entity and Afghan security forces as a national force it did not include them in the Doha Agreement as independent sovereign actors. The United States did not insist that the Afghan government as a sovereign entity and party to the war be at the negotiating table, nor that Afghan security forces as combatant forces be included in discussion of ceasefires and cessation of armed conflict. The Doha Agreement did not give Afghan government and security forces a voice. By denying their interests and role as sovereign actors, the U.S. denied them the ability to negotiate their faith and sent the wrong signal to many in Afghan security forces.

- The Doha Agreement had many flaws. However, now that the United States has left Afghanistan it has a vested interest that the Doha Agreement holds, not only that the Taliban fulfill their promise not to provide haven to terrorists, but that Afghanistan does not disintegrate into chaos and mayhem. There is an outcome even worse than the Taliban government in Afghanistan, and that is no government at all. Without any government in control of the country, no one will be accountable for what transpires on its territory. What could come out of Afghanistan then could force the U.S. to return.
- The United States must remain vigilant in defending human rights in Afghanistan and hold the Taliban accountable on how they govern the country. However, the United States

must also take care not to contribute to Afghanistan's collapse into lawlessness and chaos. The Taliban face serious challenges in managing the country, and in particular face economic collapse. The unraveling of Afghanistan is not in U.S. interest. It is important that the United States remain engaged with Afghanistan, continue to use the diplomatic channels established through the Doha talks to seek more inclusive government and respect for human and civil rights in Afghanistan. The United States must also work closely with regional actors that also seek stability in Afghanistan to create a pathway that could tie recognition and economic relief to governance, inclusiveness and commitment to fight against terrorism.