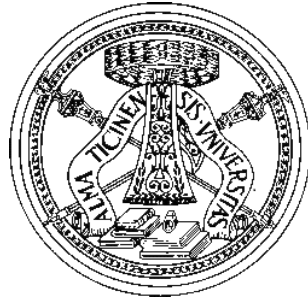


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Corso di laurea in

WORLD POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



**U.S. POLICY FAILURES IN AFGHANISTAN
LEADING TO THE COLLAPSE OF THE AFGHAN
GOVERNMENT**

Supervisor:

Professor Axel Berkofsky

Co-Supervisor:

Professor Massimo Zaccaria

Thesis written by

Sana Shabbir

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Abstract

The United States intervention in Afghanistan began in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack, with the goal of overthrowing the Taliban regime, destroying al-Qaeda, and creating a stable, secure country. However, after two decades of war, the U.S. failed to establish a stable, self-sustaining state. Following the U.S. withdrawal in 2021, the Afghan government collapsed rapidly, leading to the return of the Taliban to power, the very group the operation had aimed to eliminate. This thesis aims to identify the key U.S. policy failures that led to this outcome. The problem is not that the Taliban won; the question is why the U.S., despite vast military, financial, and technological resources, failed to produce a stable Afghan state. This thesis examines whether the failure stemmed from flawed planning, misguided assumptions, or poor execution, and argues that the collapse was not the result of a single mistake but rather an amalgam of interconnected factors. These include unclear and shifting objectives, a weak understanding of Afghan society and politics, and a state-building approach that never gained genuine local ownership. This thesis also draws some lessons from this conflict for the future.

Abstract (Italian)

L'intervento degli Stati Uniti in Afghanistan è iniziato in risposta all'attacco terroristico dell'11 settembre 2001, con l'obiettivo di rovesciare il regime talebano, distruggere al-Qaeda e creare un paese stabile e sicuro. Tuttavia, dopo due decenni di guerra, gli Stati Uniti non sono riusciti a creare uno stato stabile e autosufficiente. Dopo il ritiro degli Stati Uniti nel 2021, il governo afgano è crollato rapidamente, portando al ritorno al potere dei talebani, proprio il gruppo che l'operazione aveva mirato a eliminare. Questa tesi mira a identificare i principali fallimenti della politica statunitense che hanno portato a questo risultato. Il problema non è che i Talebani abbiano vinto; la domanda è perché gli Stati Uniti, nonostante le vaste risorse militari, finanziarie e tecnologiche, non sono riusciti a creare uno stato afgano stabile. Questa tesi esamina se il fallimento sia derivato da una pianificazione errata, da ipotesi errate o da una cattiva esecuzione e sostiene che il crollo non è stato il risultato di un singolo errore ma piuttosto di un amalgama di fattori interconnessi. Questi includono obiettivi poco chiari e mutevoli, una scarsa comprensione della società e della politica afgana e un approccio di costruzione dello Stato che non ha mai ottenuto un'autentica titolarità locale. Questa tesi trae anche alcune lezioni da questo conflitto per il futuro.

(Translated using Google Translator)

List of Acronyms

- U.S. United States
- CIA Central Intelligence Agency
- ISI Inter-Services Intelligence (Pakistan)
- USSR Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
- PDPA People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
- ANDSF Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
- ANSF Afghan National Security Forces
- ANA Afghan National Army
- ANP Afghan National police
- UNSC United Nations Security Council
- NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization
- ISAF International Security Assistance Force
- BSA Bilateral Security Agreement
- GDP Gross Domestic Products
- MAK Maktab al-Khidmat
- JUI Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam

Chapter 1

Introduction

The United States engagement in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 stands as one of the longest and most expensive military missions in modern history, costing over \$2.3 trillion (Crawford, 2021). It began in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack, when the U.S. decided to remove the Taliban from power, destroy al-Qaeda, and prevent Afghanistan from continuing to function as a base for transnational terrorism. At first, the mission seemed successful; the Taliban government collapsed rapidly, and a new government was formed with international support. However, twenty years later, in August 2021, the Afghan government quickly fell apart, and the Taliban returned to power soon after the U.S. withdrawal (Thomas, 2021), a dramatic conclusion to the longest war.

The core problem this thesis addresses is why the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan, the longest and most costly military mission in American history, failed to eliminate the Taliban and produce a stable state that was politically legitimate and institutionally strong enough to stand on its own. Despite almost twenty years of efforts, including financial assistance, training security forces, implementing governance reforms, and conducting counterinsurgency operations, the Afghan state collapsed quickly once U.S. soldiers began their withdrawal (Harpviken, 2025).

This outcome was not a sudden surprise but the result of long-standing, deep-rooted failures. Throughout the two-decade campaign, U.S. officials repeatedly declared progress, saying that Afghan security forces were improving, governance was taking hold, and the Taliban were contained. Yet ground realities were different, initially coalition forces were able to contain

the insurgency, but the Taliban gradually regained power and influence. The U.S. struggled continuously to develop and implement a coherent strategy, and the gap between the stated objectives and ground-level realities widened over time (Osimen & Newo, 2025).

The problem is not just that the Taliban won but the deeper question of why the U.S., despite having vast military, financial, and technological resources, failed to produce a stable Afghan state. What were the policy failures? This thesis examines whether the failure lay in flawed planning, misguided assumptions, or poor execution, and it argues that the collapse was not the result of a single mistake, but rather an amalgam of many factors. These include unclear and shifting objectives, a weak understanding of Afghan society and politics, and a state-building approach that never gained genuine local ownership. Moreover, after 2003, U.S. attention shifted to Iraq, which slowed the mission in Afghanistan and diminished its direction. This research also looks back to the 1980s, when the United States provided support to the Afghan Mujahideen via Pakistan during the Soviet-Afghan war, unintentionally strengthening the Islamist militant group that would haunt the post-2001 intervention. By examining these failures from the Cold War period to the 2021 withdrawal, this study aims to explain what went wrong in Afghanistan and identify the key lessons it holds.

This thesis focuses primarily on U.S. policies and the way those choices interacted with Afghan realities and however, this thesis does not claim the U.S. was the only actor responsible for the collapse of the Afghan government. Afghanistan's internal divisions, Taliban strategies and resilience, external actor's roles like Pakistan, and the choices of Afghans made themselves all mattered significantly. However, the primary emphasis of this research is on the U.S. policies. The main period of analysis is 2001 to 2021, but this thesis includes a historical chapter covering 1979-2001

because the Cold War period shaped the militant network and regional dynamics that later confronted the U.S. intervention.

Research Question and Research Objectives

The core research question of the thesis is:

Why did U.S. policy in Afghanistan fail, leading to the collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's return to power in 2021?

This thesis aims to achieve three primary objectives:

First, this thesis seeks to identify and examine the fundamental reasons behind the failure of U.S. policy in Afghanistan and the rapid collapse of the Afghan government in 2021. Instead of pinning the outcome to a single cause, this study examines the strategic, political, and institutional aspects that led to the mission's failure.

Second, the thesis analyzes how structural factors, including unclear and shifting strategic objectives, limited Afghan ownership, and weak interagency coordination and oversight, compromised state-building and security initiatives.

Third, the research aims to draw broader lessons from the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. It evaluates the implications of this case for future military interventions and state-building initiatives, emphasizing the significance of strategic coherence, cultural understanding, and sustained local ownership.

To achieve these objectives, this thesis links the historical background, such as the U.S. backing for the Mujahideen against the Soviet Union through Pakistan, to the post-2001 intervention. It argues that earlier U.S. actions indirectly shaped the militant and political landscape that U.S. forces encountered after 2001.

Contribution:

This thesis adds to the discussion about why foreign intervention often fails, even after spending a lot of time and resources, especially in complex non-Western countries like Afghanistan. Afghanistan's geography and history have long made external conflict difficult, and repeated attempts by outside powers to reshape politics from the center have faced long resistance. Thomas Barfield (2022) argues that the British Empire fought three Anglo-Afghan wars (1839-1842, 1878-1880, and 1919) to sustain its influence, yet faced enduring local opposition and the country's fragmented political structure, ultimately forcing it toward indirect rule rather than outright domination. Likewise, the Soviet Union intervened in 1979 to support a communist regime, but subsequently withdrew after a prolonged and costly insurgency led by the mujahideen (Braithwaite, 2022). Together, these historical experiences helped to cement Afghanistan's status as the "graveyard of empires," highlighting a recurring tension in which externally imposed centralized authority conflicted with the country's deeply embedded decentralized tribal tradition (Barfield, 2022). Many studies talk about military strategy and humanitarian issues. This thesis tries to connect both, showing how poor planning, unrealistic goals, and weak local support combined to cause failure even when the intervention is done by the strongest militaries.

It helps to understand that success in such a mission depends not only on military strength but also on deep political understanding, cultural awareness, and cooperation with local communities. In short, this study gives a clearer and simpler view of why the United States mission in Afghanistan failed and how future interventions can avoid the same mistakes.

Literature review

The collapse of the Afghan Republic in August 2021, following nearly two decades of U.S.-led military intervention and state-building attempts, has generated substantial scholarly debate about the causes of U.S. policy failure. This thesis investigates the U.S. policy failure that led to this outcome, starting with the literature already conducted by others.

Steve Coll's work (Coll, 2004) provides a historical understanding of the United States support for the Afghan Mujahedin during the Soviet-Afghan war (1979-1989), largely through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which helped create strong militant networks and a system of proxy warfare in the region (Coll, 2004). This support, intended as short-term strategic help against the Soviet Union, unintentionally strengthened Islamist groups in the region, and post 1989 fragmentation and the 1990s civil war produced conditions for the rise of the Taliban. This research highlights a common pattern, United States alliances that function in the short term can cause long-term problems for stability, shaping many of the challenges the U.S. faced after 2001.

Similarly, Ryan Crocker, in his article, also states that U.S. support for the Afghan Mujahedin during the Soviet-Afghan war strengthened the militant Islamist group in Afghanistan. This created a pattern of blowback, where past actions led to future problems. As a result of this support, militancy took root in Afghanistan, making it considerably harder to counter the insurgent movement after the 2001 invasion (Crocker, 2021).

Research on the post-invasion period investigates the persistent strategic confusion that defined U.S. policy after the 2001 invasion. Initial objectives were exclusively focused on counterterrorism (combating al-Qaeda and punishing the Taliban for 9/11); however, the mission subsequently

broadened to encompass counterinsurgency, democratization, state-building, and additional goals, all mismatched to Afghan realities. Herd argues that “Counter-terrorism morphed into counter-insurgency and then democracy-building, nation-building... efforts which failed to realize that embedded culture and social institutions trump Western ones” (Herd, 2021). Scholars also note that U.S. goals were overly ambitious and inconsistent, resulting in a mismatch between ends and means.

Osimen and Newo, in their works, identify “strategic miscalculation and mission creep” as a fundamental weakness of the twenty-year intervention. Their research employing a theoretical lens of strategic failure observes that the United States continued to accept new goals without a clear plan, and the article notes that the failure of the nation-building can be attributed to a deep mismatch between Western assumptions and Afghan socio-political realities (Osimen & Newo, 2025). Their analysis highlights three major areas of strategic flaw: mission creep, over-militarization, and hasty withdrawal without creating sustainable structures.

Another criticism focuses on the flawed project of constructing a centralized Afghan state. An article by Murtazashvili argues that the 2004 Afghan constitution and the broader political framework re-established a strong unitary state with power concentrated in the presidency. This approach is frequently perceived as mismatched with Afghanistan’s tradition of decentralized governance and local autonomy (Murtazashvili, 2022). This framework, borrowed from past Afghan regimes, Afghanistan’s constitutional history often endorsed centralization on paper even when power was fragmented in practice, but centralization conflicts with local governance realities, it failed to reflect the country’s ethnic diversity and decentralized governance.

This effort to establish Western-style democratic institutions largely ignored Afghanistan's tribal and decentralized society. This resulted in corruption, weak government institutions, and a lack of trust among local communities. Osimen and Newo note that excessive emphasis was placed on military solutions, while political reconciliation and trust building in rural areas through traditional procedures such as jirgas were completely overlooked (Osimen & Newo, 2025).

Another criticism focuses on the corruption and legitimacy of the state. An article by Kugelman argues that corruption is more than simply a governance issue in Afghanistan. It is one of the most serious threats to national security and state existence. Corruption was embedded within the system. He also blames the international community, especially the United States, for the massive amount of aid being poured into Afghanistan despite a lack of institutional capacity to absorb or monitor spending. This systematic corruption weakened the credibility of the United States backed government in the eyes of ordinary Afghans (Kugelman, 2016).

Herd links this corruption to the crisis of state legitimacy, observing that citizens came to see the Kabul government as predatory and self-serving, eroding any devotion to the state. Afghans lost faith that the government would ever deliver justice or services fairly (Herd, 2021). Kraemer similarly highlights that the Afghan state has struggled to achieve political legitimacy after 2001, because legitimacy depends on whether citizens regard the state as lawful, accountable, and capable of providing security and services. Corruption weakened citizens confidence in the Afghan government, it directly undermined the state's legitimacy, creating a cycle where illegitimate governance became increasingly unaccountable (Kraemer, 2010).

According to Carter Malkasian, the Taliban ultimately prevailed not because they were stronger militarily but because they were perceived as more legitimate by enough Afghans to maintain a long war. On the other hand, the Afghan government, despite receiving international support, has never entirely overcome its legitimate deficit, particularly in rural Pashtun areas where the Taliban drew their strongest support (Malkasian, 2021). This legitimacy gap meant that Afghan institutions could not survive without external support, and it was confirmed when the government collapsed within a few days of the US withdrawal.

Weigand, similarly, in his article argues that the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 was the result of long-term political and social failures rather than a sudden military collapse. The Taliban ultimately won because international involvement and the Afghan government failed to establish legitimate authority in the eyes of the Afghan citizens. Over time, this failure made it possible for the Taliban to present themselves as a credible alternative authority, especially in rural areas (Weigand, 2022).

United States government reports like SIGAR publication (What We Need to learn: Lessons from Twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction) also claim that the United States efforts for reconstruction failed not because of a lack of resources or efforts but due to structural, conceptual, and political flaws in how reconstruction was planned and carried out.

Another criticism focuses on the exit process and the Doha framework. The Doha agreement, officially the "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan," was signed in February 2020 (Doha Agreement, 2020). General Milley's congressional testimony describes the Doha agreement, negotiated by the Trump administration with the Taliban, that set the conditions for withdrawal of forces, "pulled the rug out, morale-wise" of both the Afghan security forces and government (Matza, 2024). The absence

of the Afghan government from U.S.-Taliban talks further affects the legitimacy of the Afghan government, degrades morale, and accelerates collapse.

This thesis synthesizes these critical perspectives, arguing that relying too much on the military, without matching the political and cultural realities, actually worked against the goal of building a stable and legitimate state. Insurgencies are not defeated only by killing fighters, but they are defeated when political order becomes more legitimate, and this thesis shows how the intervention and methods sometimes increased corruption, pushed communities away from the government. Over time, the insurgency used this to present themselves as more authentic than state-backed by foreign powers.

Methodology and Limitations:

This research employs a qualitative, single-case study research design to investigate the failure of U.S. policy in Afghanistan. This research focuses on U.S. intervention in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, with historical context from 1979 onward to generate an in-depth understanding. The data collection for this research study relies on both primary and secondary sources to construct a descriptive analysis of the research problem. The primary sources are in the form of official documents, speeches by the leadership, military reports, agreements, and secondary sources, including books, academic papers, think tank reports, and it also involves analysis by experts.

Limitations:

The study is limited to the analysis of pre-existing texts and does not involve firsthand data collection via fieldwork, surveys, or interviews. As such, it relies entirely on publicly assessable documents, institutional reports,

and previous academic studies. This method allows for a thorough analysis of existing literature and official records.

Division of the study:

This thesis has been divided into five chapters following this introduction. Chapter 2 provides the historical background from 1979, examining United States and Pakistan support for the Mujahideen during the Soviet-Afghan war and the rise of the Taliban after the Soviet withdrawal. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the United States policies in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021, analyzing them in distinct phases. Chapter 4 examines the main U.S. policy failure in Afghanistan. It analyzes key U.S. missteps and shortcomings, including unclear strategic goals, misreading the local context, weak state-building efforts, widespread corruption, coordination failures, and the inability to build trust with the Afghan population. Together, these factors undermined the mission and contributed to the failure to establish a stable Afghan government. Chapter 5 extracts the policy lessons learned from the conflict. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main findings and final reflections on the U.S. experience in Afghanistan.

Chapter 2

Historical background

This chapter traces the historical roots of the United States involvement in Afghanistan, beginning with the Soviet invasion in 1979 and ending with the Taliban's rise to power by the mid-1990s. Understanding this period is essential for explaining the eventual failure of U.S. policy that culminated in the collapse of the Afghan state in 2021. During the 1980s, the United States launched one of the largest covert operations in its history, providing funding, weapons, and training to Afghan mujahedin fighters, often via Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (Coll, 2004). This policy was primarily designed to diminish Soviet influence in the region and ultimately contributed to the Soviet Union's exit from Afghanistan in 1989. Although this strategy accomplished its immediate objective of compelling a Soviet departure, it also had significant unintended consequences. The extensive militarization of Afghan factions, the consolidation of Islamic networks, and the absence of a political solution after the war led to the erosion of Afghan political authority during the 1990s.

These developments established circumstances that subsequently facilitated the rise of the Taliban movement. The combination of civil war, institutional collapse, and pervasive insecurity enabled the Taliban to position itself as a force capable of reinstating order. This chapter illustrates that the foundations of America's subsequent policy mistakes were established during this period, when short-term goals overshadowed long-term consideration about Afghanistan's stability and the risks associated with arming extremists.

Overview of the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

The roots of the Soviet-Afghan War can be traced to the 1978 Saur revolution, when the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) seized power in a military coup. The PDPA was a small, urban-based Marxist party with limited social backing that attempted to transform Afghan society along socialist lines. Once in office, PDPA began pushing radical reforms intended to reshape Afghanistan (B. R. Rubin, 2002). These reforms included land redistribution, canceling peasant debt to landowners, and social policies aimed at expanding women's rights, like freedom to choose marriage and compulsory education for girls. However, these changes shocked many deeply conservative rural communities, where tribal traditions and religious authority played a dominant role. These reforms triggered widespread rebellion against the Kabul government (B. R. Rubin, 2002, Chapter 8).

Initially, the uprising against the PDPA was disorganized and lacked unified leadership, led by traditional elites and some Islamist militants without political affiliations. The PDPA government responded with violence, but this proved ineffective and escalated the conflict. A major turning point was the Herat uprising in March 1979, when rebels attacked the government garrison in the western city of Herat. The government suppressed the revolt with shocking brutality, leaving an estimated 5,000 to 25,000 people dead as the uprising spread nationwide (Zanchetta, 2025). By the summer of 1979, violence had escalated in Kabul (Zanchetta, 2025). A U.S. official stated that the rebellions were united by the belief that they were protecting Islam against a government that had "sold itself to Russian non-believers" (Zanchetta, 2025).

This escalating instability pulled the Soviet Union deeper into Afghan matters. At first, in 1979, the Soviet Union did not want to intervene in Afghanistan. Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev believed Afghanistan's poor economy did not seem worth the risk of direct intervention (Hartman, 2002). However, internal power struggles within the PDPA further destabilized the regime. The Soviet Union preferred Afghan communist leader Nur Muhammed Taraki, but he was overthrown and later assassinated in the power struggle with Hafizullah Amin (Coll, 2004), which created further instability within the PDPA regime. As a result, Soviet leaders concluded that removing Amin and intervening militarily was necessary, leading to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 (Coll, 2004).

At the same time, broader regional development heightened Soviet concerns. Islamic fundamentalism was rapidly growing, particularly following the Iranian revolution (1979), which brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power. The Soviet Union did not want Islamic fundamentalism to take over Afghanistan. They worried this could spread into the Soviet Union's Muslim regions in Central Asia (Hartman, 2002). To prevent the collapse of the Afghan communist regime and maintain Afghanistan as a buffer state, the Soviet leadership decided that direct intervention was necessary. In December 1979, Soviet troops entered Afghanistan, initiating a conflict that would last nearly a decade.

United States involvement in Afghanistan

Before the Soviet Union invasion, Afghanistan held little strategic importance for the United States. The U.S. had a general policy of preventing "too much" Soviet influence there, but it was not central to America's strategic planning (Hartman, 2002). This changed between 1979 to 1989

with the Soviet Union's intervention, quickly making Afghanistan central to U.S. strategic and geopolitical interests (Azizi & Batish, 2025).

Interestingly, the U.S. involvement began even before Soviet troops entered Afghanistan. In April 1979, America official started quietly meeting Afghan rebels who were fighting the communist government (Galster, 2001). In July 1979, the Carter administration approved a small covert operation providing propaganda support, and medical aid to insurgents rebelling against what the U.S. still regarded as a domestic communist revolution (Cogan, 1993). Later, President Carter's National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski acknowledged that the United States understood such support might increase the likelihood of Soviet intervention. In an interview to French reporter, he stated: "We did not push Russia to intervene, but we knowingly increased the probability that they would" (*Brzezinski Interview* | David N. Gibbs).

After the Soviet invasion, U.S. policy shifted dramatically. American policymakers interpreted the Soviet move as a potential threat, particularly because Afghanistan's location placed Soviet forces closer to the oil-rich Persian Gulf region. In response, President Carter declared the Persian Gulf a vital U.S. security interest and began developing a strategy to counter Soviet expansion (Azizi & Batish, 2025).

The invasion generated strong opposition within the United States government. Supporting the Afghan resistance quickly became a central element of American Cold War strategy. For many policymakers, the conflict also offered a chance to hurt the Soviet Union, and some U.S. leaders wanted "revenge for Vietnam." Congressman Charlie Wilson, one of the strongest advocates of supporting the mujahideen said, "I wanted to hurt them. I wanted them to count body bags going back to Moscow" (Hartman,

2002). Similarly, Brzezinski described the Afghan conflict as the chance to “finally sow shit in their backyard” (Hartman, 2002).

So, the United States was determined to support the mujahideen to prevent a Soviet victory. Initially, the U.S. approach focused on containing Soviet influence rather than rapid Soviet withdrawal. However, U.S. policymakers increasingly recognized the strategic value of prolonging the conflict, as it imposed military and economic costs on the Soviet Union (Coll, 2004, pp. 52-60). In this way, Afghanistan became a protracted and costly war for the Soviets, contributing to broader Cold War efforts to weaken Soviet power.

Four days after the Soviet invasion, President Carter approved a major expansion of the CIA’s covert assistance program. Within days, the United States began supplying military equipment and funding to the Afghan mujahideen in addition to humanitarian aid (Hartman, 2002). Under Reagan, this support grew further and became one of the largest covert operations in CIA history.

The Mechanics of Covert Aid: Pakistan’s Central Role

Pakistan played the central role in the U.S. covert program. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) did not deliver aid directly to Afghan mujahideen instead, the CIA used Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to distribute weapons and funds, because ISI already had strong links to the mujahideen. The U.S. money went through ISI into the Mujahideen’s war funds. A CIA official said, “the U.S. provided the means for war and gave them to people who could fight, for the goals the U.S. agreed with” (Cogan, 1993). In other words, American resources flowed through Pakistan's hands before reaching the Afghan resistance.

Before the Soviet invasion, U.S.-Pakistan relations were at a low point during the Carter administration. President Carter emphasized human rights and nuclear non-proliferation, both of which created friction with General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime. The problem with Pakistan includes General Zia-ul-Haq kept delaying the promised election after taking power in the 1977 coup, his execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto despite Carter's request, Pakistan's nuclear program, and Pakistan's hesitant response to the burning of the U.S. embassy in Islamabad (Zanchetta, 2025). After the Soviet invasion, the U.S. attitude toward Pakistan changed "overnight". U.S. reaffirmed the 1959 security agreement against communist aggression and offered to strengthen Pakistan's security. In January 1980, Zia mocked a White House aid offer of £400 million as "peanuts." But despite political tension, covert cooperation grew rapidly (Zanchetta, 2025).

When Reagan became president, Pakistan became even more important. He said, "I know we have problems, but things are going to change." In 1981, the Reagan administration proposed a \$3.2 billion aid package to reassure Pakistan of U.S. security support and gain benefits for U.S. regional interests (Hartman, 2002). Crucially, Pakistan demanded that all CIA aid be distributed through the ISI. The U.S. accepted this, and that means ISI had the power to decide which Afghan factions would get the most money and weapons (Rashid, 1999).

This covert assistance dramatically increased the military capacity of the Afghan resistance. However, the program also had structural weaknesses that would later produce unintended consequences. The U.S. handed effective control of the resistance to Pakistan's intelligence by routing aid through Pakistan's ISI instead of personally overseeing the Afghan group. This approach enabled the ISI to prioritize Islamist forces that corresponded with Pakistan's strategic goals. The allocation of resources

disproportionately empowered extreme factions among the mujahideen and laid the foundation for future instability (Rashid, 1999; Hartman, 2002).

The role of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia was also a crucial partner, providing money and weapons. Brzezinski and Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher went to Saudi Arabia in February 1980 to discuss regional security and how to aid Afghan rebels. Brzezinski persuaded the Saudis leaders to match the American financial contribution to the Afghan resistance dollar-for-dollar (Zanchetta, 2025).

The United States wanted Saudi Arabia as an ally because of its strategic value after the Second World War, especially the Dhahran airbase, its petroleum potential, and its anti-communist stance. Additionally, Saudi Arabia was a deeply conservative Wahhabi monarchy that strongly opposed communism and was also viewed as a useful counterweight to the rise of the Shia revolutionary Islamic force in Iran. Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution further strengthened ties between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, as both Washington and the Saudi royal family feared that growing Islamic revolutionary sentiments could eventually threaten the stability of the Saudi state. These concerns appeared increasingly justified in 1979, with Juhayman al-Utaybi's seizure of the grand mosque in Mecca and the Shia uprising in the eastern province. In response, the CIA reportedly pledged to assist the Saudi Arabia General Intelligence Department in identifying and managing communist threats, while Saudi Arabia, in return, agreed to support U.S. efforts against the Soviet Union, particularly by sharing the financial burden of backing the mujahideen (Coll, 2004, p. 79).

In January 1980, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia made a formal deal that Saudi Arabia would give the mujahideen \$60 million every year from 1981 to

1983. Saudi Ulama issued a fatwa (religious ruling) saying that Saudi zakat (2.5% of Muslim tax) should be donated to Afghan mujahideen fighters. Saudi Arabia also used Pakistan's refugee camps as a chance to expand its influence by spreading Wahhabi Islam (Azizi & Batish, 2025).

Escalation of United States support: Weapons and Training

Throughout the 1980s, the U.S. assistance to the Mujahideen increased dramatically. By 1987, the United States assistance reached about \$700 million per year in military aid, and overall, the U.S. covert aid costs over \$3 billion (Galster, 2001). In the early phase of operation, the CIA attempted to maintain "plausible deniability" and only sent weapons and equipment that were similarly used by the Soviet Union or Eastern European countries instead of sending identifiable American weapons (Hartman, 2002). So that the United States involvement could be concealed more easily. Egypt became an important supplier in this arrangement, providing large quantities of Soviet-bloc weapons that could be funneled to the Afghan mujahideen without immediately revealing an American hand behind the operation (Coll, 1992).

As the war intensifies, the United States support expanded far beyond the simple transfer of small arms. The CIA provided satellite mapping intelligence, a demolition expert to train delayed-timer attacks, and large quantities of C-4 explosives for a sabotage mission against Soviet and Afghan government targets (Coll, 1992). The US also provided targeting devices for mortars linked to a U.S. Navy satellite, wire-guided anti-tank missiles. In addition to weapons, the CIA also helped Pakistani trainers establish a school for guerrilla warfare and urban sabotage, where mujahideen fighters were trained in the techniques of irregular warfare (Coll, 1992).

One of the significant developments occurred in 1985, when the U.S. Congress approved sending U.S.-made Stinger missiles, the highly effective missiles in the world at that time (Hartman, 2002). However, the decision to provide Stinger missiles also carried serious risks. Intelligence officials worried about “leakage” of stingers into the hands of terrorists (Hartman, 2002). These missiles dramatically altered the battlefield by enabling mujahideen fighters to shoot down Soviet helicopters and aircraft, thereby weakening one of Moscow’s greatest military advantages.

This support significantly increased the military capacity of the Afghan resistance. Fighters were not only armed but also trained in specialized forms of combat, including sabotage, assassination, and urban guerrilla tactics. Rebels were also given sniper rifles that were used to assassinate key Soviet Military leaders, and some members of Afghanistan communist party (PDPA) (Galster, 2001). In this sense, the United States helped create some of the deadliest urban guerrilla fighters.

ISI’s Control and Empowerment of Extremist Factions

The ISI alone controlled the distribution of American aid. Brigadier Mohammad Yousaf, who headed the ISI’s Afghan Bureau, insisted that the ISI decided who received weapons, how many, and what types (Zanchetta, 2025). This decision had long-term consequences for the structure of the Afghan resistance.

Pakistan's intelligence often gave the most resources to the most extreme fundamentalist groups among the mujahideen (Rashid, 1999), particularly Hizb-i-Islami, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, became the primary beneficiary of the ISI’s distribution system (Hartman, 2002). He was strongly anti-American, yet he became powerful largely because of U.S. money and weapons. Saudi Arabia gave him \$2 million in the early stages of the covert

war in 1979 (Hartman, 2002). Pakistan promoted him as the most effective anti-Soviet force, and he received higher-quality weapons than others (Coll, 1992). According to some estimates, Hekmatyar's faction received at least 80% of U.S. aid (Zunes, 2009).

A lot of people in the U.S. government recognized the danger of arming extremists. State Department Afghanistan specialist Eliza Van Hollen argues the CIA should not have let ISI control distribution (Hartman, 2002). A former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan called Hekmatyar an extremist and very violent (Coll, 2004). In the early 1970s, his followers threw acid in women students faces for not wearing a veil (Coll, 2004). In the 1980s, his fighters attacked a school south of Kabul because girls were being educated with boys, they bombed it and killed the head teacher's wife and beheaded the teacher in front of students (Hartman, 2002). A U.S. Congressman, Jack Wheeler said corruption was worst in Hekmatyar's group and argued that no U.S. aid should go to him (Hartman, 2002), but aid continued to his group. Professor Barnett Rubin testifies before the U.S. House of Representatives that Hekmatyar's militia conducted a "reign of terror against insufficiently Islamic Intellectuals" in Pakistan's refugee camps, yet "both the ISI and CIA considered him as a tool for shaping the future of Central Asia" (Zunes, 2009).

[Foreign recruitment and the emergence of the Global Jihadist Network:](#)

The Afghan war also attracted thousands of foreign volunteers from across the Muslim world. The CIA allowed Pakistan's ISI to recruit foreigners to support the war against the Soviet Union. Estimates suggest that approximately 35,000 fighters from more than 40 countries came to Afghanistan, and tens of thousands went to Pakistan to join camps supported

by Saudi Arabia. These camps acted like colleges, spreading pan-Islamic extremism (Rashid, 1999).

Among them was Osama Bin Laden, son of a wealthy Saudi family with Yemeni roots, and Abdullah Azzam, a well-known Sunni Islamic scholar from Palestine, who went to Afghanistan to take part in the Soviet-Afghan war (Azizi & Batish, 2025). In 1984, Azzam and Bin Laden established the Maktab al-Khidmat (Services Bureau). The purpose of the organization was to register and train foreign mujahideen and to fund the war against the Soviets. Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Afghan mujahideen and MAK succeeded. However, Bin Laden and Azzam's jihad principle extended beyond Afghanistan. In September 1988, Osama bin Laden, Abdullah Azzam, and a few other Islamists created Al-Qaeda, which means "base." Al-Qaeda's motto has been "jihad and rifle alone: no negotiations, conferences, or dialogues." Al-Qaeda's new objectives aim to liberate Arab territories from Western and U.S. domination (Takil, 2022, p. 46).

According to Sebastian Schnelle, Abdullah Azzam, rather than Bin Laden, may be more accountable for al-Qaeda's rise. Azzam believed all Muslims must fight whenever Islam was threatened. He represents the idea that "one person's terrorist can be another's freedom fighter." After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Azzam issued a fatwa titled "Defense of the Muslim lands." When it was approved by Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdul Aziz bin Baz, it gave religious legitimacy to global jihad in Afghanistan. Because Afghanistan lacked enough fighters, Azzam called on all able-bodied Muslims men worldwide to come defend it. In 1983, Azzam met Osama bin Laden, and they established a strong alliance. Due to the bin Laden family's connection with the Saudi government, numerous young

men from throughout the Middle East traveled to Afghanistan to fight what they saw as a holy war (Kotarski, 2018).

[The Soviet Union withdrawal, United States disengagement, and civil war](#)

When the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, a power vacuum appeared. No one clearly controlled the country anymore. Inside the CIA, a serious debate began over which Afghan leader the United States should support. At the time, Afghanistan's President Mohammad Najibullah, who had close ties to Moscow, the U.S. did not want him to stay in power, as he was linked to the Soviets. This created an immediate question within the U.S. policy circle, like what faction should be supported in the post-Soviet period. Within the CIA, there were two sides, the anticommunist stalwarts supported Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, believing he could bring stability, even though he held an extreme fundamentalist religious view. More moderate CIA officials preferred Ahmad Shah Massoud, who had more secular ideas, and in hindsight, he might have been the better choice for the United States (Coll, 2004, pp.190-199). Pakistan's intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), controlled where U.S. funding went. As a result, most support went to Hekmatyar rather than Massoud. The post-Soviet political settlement also proved unstable. In 1992, the Peshawar Accord attempted to establish a post-war interim government, which would lead to the formation of a highly regarded coalition government that included both Massoud's and Hekmatyar's groups. Even though Osama bin Laden strongly opposed it, a coalition government was formed. Massoud supported the coalition for an honorable reason. He believed that all parties involved in expelling the Soviets from Afghanistan deserve an equal say in the governance of the nation (Nojumi, 2002, p. 112). Yet the agreement failed to produce lasting unity. Rivalries among the former mujahideen factions soon intensified.

Overall, Afghanistan largely disappeared from the United States strategic priorities after the Soviet Union's withdrawal. The U.S. rapidly reduced its involvement in the region, but limited support continued. The U.S. sent a small amount of money and weapons to the mujahideen through Pakistan's ISI, to assist them in overthrowing the remaining communist government.

Numerous Afghan experts condemned the United States for abruptly abandoning Afghanistan following the Soviet Union's collapse. Journalist and Afghanistan specialist Ed Girardet remarked, "the United States really blew it. It dropped Afghanistan like a hot potato" (M. Rubin, 2002).

Michael Armacost, then Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, stated that the Soviet withdrawal restored regional strategic balance, adding that "the U.S. had no blueprint for Afghanistan." Unlike Germany and Japan, post-World War II industrial powerhouses vital to global capitalism, Afghanistan lacked the economic capacity strategic weight, and institutional foundation that would justify comparable nation-building efforts (Hartman, 2002). U.S. policymakers, therefore, had shown little interest in strengthening Afghan sovereignty. With few resources and investment opportunities, America regarded the country as insignificant, except as a tool to contain communism. As Carter's CIA Director, Stansfield Turner later acknowledged, "our objectives were not peace and happiness in Afghanistan," just "crushing communism and expelling the Russians" (Hartman, 2002).

Without external support, Afghanistan descended into civil war among competing mujahideen factions. Widespread corruption, lawlessness, and violence created conditions that facilitated the rise of a new movement. The Taliban, as an official group, emerged in 1994. The Taliban movement began in southern Afghanistan around Kandahar, by "veteran fighters in the anti-

Soviet jihad” (Coll, 2004, p. 285). The word “Taliban” is the plural of talib, meaning student. Most Taliban members were young men who had been war refugees in Pakistan and studied in Deobandi madrassas, particularly those linked to Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI). In these schools, they received strict religious instruction and, in many cases, military training as well (Hartman, 2002).

Led by Mullah Omar, the founder and leader of the Taliban, had also been part of the anti-Soviet jihad. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, Omar joined the others in resisting the occupation. While serving on the front line, he sustained multiple wounds, including one that cost him his right eye. After Soviets left, Omar kept a low profile. He became an imam at a small mosque in Kandahar during the early stages of the Afghan Civil War. He later emerged as the leader of the Taliban (Coll, 2012).

Omer had received his religious education at Darul Uloom Haqqania in Pakistan, one of the most influential madrassas associated with Taliban. Its chancellor, Maulana Sami ul-Haq is often called the “Father of the Taliban” because so many Taliban figures had studied there (Kotarski, 2018). He made several claims, such as the mujahedin's fight against the Soviets in the 1980s was a legitimate jihad, and his madrassa did not send students to fight, they joined voluntarily. He dismissed claims of terrorist training in the madrassa as mere baseless Western propaganda. After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, he similarly argued that the U.S. invasion violated Afghanistan’s sovereignty and justified jihad, just like the Soviet invasion over two decades prior (Ali, 2007).

The Taliban's rapid rise to power can’t be explained without looking at what was happening in Afghanistan in the early 1990s. After the Soviet-backed Najibullah government, the country fell apart into civil war, with different

groups fighting, rising crime, and corruption everywhere. Many Afghans were tired of chaos and corruption. The Taliban gained support because they promised to restore safety and justice, and they punished crime quickly and publicly. Their governance was frequently harsh; nonetheless, for some Afghans, prompt retribution for offenses and the assurance of stability were more desirable than perpetual disorder (Britannica, 2026).

Pakistan's ISI speeds things up further, providing funding, logistical assistance, and strategic support. With this combination of local appeal and external backing, the Taliban rapidly expanded throughout Afghanistan, ultimately gaining dominance over the majority of the nation by the mid-1990s (Coll, 2012).

Unintended Consequences: Terrorism and Blowback

The Afghan jihad produced a number of unintended consequences and led to the spread of terrorist acts beyond its boundaries. The extremist network linked to the Afghan Jihad later became associated with global terrorism (Hartman, 2002).

Several analysts described these developments as an example of "blowback." A term used to describe the unintended consequences of covert operations. The Egypt director of the state information, Nabil Osman stated that "we have created a monster" (Dahlburg, 1996). These monsters not only threaten Americans but also risk the safety of people all across the world.

According to one U.S. diplomat in Pakistan, "the chicken coming home to roost. You cannot pour billions into a global anti-communist jihad, accept fighters from everywhere, and then ignore the consequences. But we did" (Rashid, 1999). Algerian sociologist Mahfoud Bennoune said about U.S. policy that "U.S. government helped create a monster that later turned

against the U.S. and the world, and that thousands of Arabs trained in Afghanistan became like a killing machine” (Dahlburg, 1996).

The U.S. approach contributed to the transnational spread of terrorism beyond Afghanistan’s borders, as numerous attacks were associated with militants who had participated in the Afghan jihad, including the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 U.S. airmen, the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole, and the September 11 attacks. Three of the four suspects involved in the Saudi Arabia attacks acknowledge receiving weapons and training in Afghanistan. Additionally, Mahmud Abouhamila and Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, both suspects in the February 1993 World Trade Center bombing, had fought in Afghanistan during the 1980s (Rashid, 1999).

Robin Cook, a former British Foreign Secretary, was one of the most prominent figures who argued there was clear-cut proof linking the CIA directly to al-Qaeda. In The Guardian article published shortly after the July 2005 London bombings, Cook stated that Bin Laden emerged as a major blunder by Western intelligence agencies. In the 1980s, he was supported in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, receiving U.S. assistance through the CIA’s broader effort to arm the mujahideen and benefitting from Saudi funding. Cook states that Al-Qaeda meaning “the database,” began as a computer record of the thousands of mujahideen fighters the CIA helped recruit and train to fight the Soviets. Shockingly, with devastating results, Washington never seemed to consider that after Russia’s exit, Bin Laden’s network could redirect its hostility toward the West (Cook, 2005).

[The Drug Trade:](#)

Another major blowback effect was a huge rise in opium and heroin production and transportation. David Musto, advisor to the U.S. Strategic

Council of Drug Abuse, warned policymakers that the mujahideen were heavily involved in drug trafficking (Hartman, 2002). But the decision maker ignored the warning.

The heroin trade helped fund the jihad and created a larger global supply of heroin, making it more affordable and accessible. Some attribute the shipment of heroin from Afghanistan and Pakistan has been linked to the 77% spike in heroin related death in New York City (Hartman, 2002). World opium production increased from an estimated 1,600 tons in 1982 to 4,700 tons in 1990 (Hartman, 2002). In 1984, 51% of heroin in the U.S. came via the Afghanistan-Pakistan border (Hartman, 2002).

The rising supply of heroin in Pakistan had also caused devastating consequences. Its heroin addict population increased from almost non-existent in 1979 to 1.2 million in 1985 (Hartman, 2002). Without the CIA's covert war system, Afghan drug dealers would not have gained access to huge U.S. and European markets. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar emerged as the most powerful drug lord. The U.S. and Pakistan could not touch him because he was politically important in the war. He ran six out of twenty drug refineries in Pakistan (Hartman, 2002).

CIA official Charles Cogan later admitted that "their major goal was to cause as much damage as possible to the Soviet. We lacked the necessary resources and time to conduct an investigation into the narcotic trade. I do not believe we need to apologize for this, because every operation has its consequences... there was a fallout in terms of drugs, but the essential goal was achieved. The Soviets fled Afghanistan" (McCoy, 1997).

The debate over responsibility

Scholars remain divided over how much responsibility the CIA bears for the rise of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Many scholars argue that the CIA is largely to blame for the rise of the Taliban and al-Qaeda because it funded the Afghan mujahideen during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Some of the fighters and networks strengthened during that conflict later became part of an extremist organization. The most famous example is Osama bin Laden (Kotarski, 2018).

This argument is commonly framed through the idea of “blowback,” meaning unintended consequences of covert intervention. The most famous book supporting this view is *Charlie Wilson’s War* by George Crile. It explains how Charlie Wilson, a U.S. Congressman and one of the strongest advocates of supporting the mujahideen, persuaded other politicians to fund the mujahideen to fight the Soviet Union, the U.S. enemy during the Cold War. After the 9/11 attacks, Wilson reportedly said, “My God, what have we done?”, showing he had not fully realized that these fighters whom the U.S. supported might later turn against the United States (Crile, 2003). Steve Coll’s book *Ghost War* also highlights the several blunders made by the CIA and its associated organizations during and after the Soviet-Afghan war. Other authors also supported this blowback idea. Peter Dale Scott’s book, *The Road to 9/11: Wealth, Empire, and the Future of America*, places primary responsibility on the CIA for both the 9/11 attacks and the earlier wave of al-Qaeda violence in the 1990s.

However, not everyone agrees with this view and rejects the theory of “blowback”. Peter Bergen, in *Holy War Inc.*, in his chapter on the CIA, concludes that although the CIA made serious mistakes in handling the Soviet-Afghan war, the media has greatly exaggerated its role in creating the

Taliban and al-Qaeda (Bergen, 2002). The CIA's mistake was overreliance on the ISI, as all U.S. support was channeled to the Afghan mujahideen via Pakistan's ISI. While Afghan jihad contributed to the rise of militant Islamist, Bergen rejects the claim that the CIA directly created these groups or that U.S. strategy intentionally fostered their emergence (Bergen, 2002).

A more balanced interpretation suggests that responsibility was shared, but unevenly. The CIA clearly bears responsibility because it funded and armed Islamist fighters without maintaining adequate oversight over who ultimately benefited from that support. It also failed to push Pakistan hard enough to support more moderate Afghan factions. According to Steve Coll, Pakistan's Inter-Services Agency (ISI) acted as the mediator between the CIA and the Mujahideen. Even though the CIA had never directly trained the mujahideen, they still hold significant responsibility. As Coll notes, the Stinger missiles the U.S. provided to the mujahideen eventually ended up in the hands of the Taliban after Soviet withdrawal in 1989, and after gaining experience in training mujahideen, the ISI later used similar methods to train militants for conflict with India over Kashmir (Coll, 2004). Many believe Pakistan government, especially its intelligence agency (ISI), played a much bigger role. Pakistan used that influence according to its own strategic interest, especially since it desires to maintain Afghanistan as a friendly buffer against India. Sean P. Winchell argues that the Taliban already looked strong, headed toward victory early in the conflict, but when the ISI became directly involved, it effectively cemented Taliban dominance in Afghanistan for the near term (Winchell, 2003).

However, it is highly unlikely that Charlie Wilson or anyone at the CIA could have foreseen that the mujahideen would eventually turn against the country that had armed them. While there were certainly warning signs that some members within the mujahideen deserved additional surveillance after the

Soviet Union's withdrawal, once the Soviet Union withdrew, Washington largely lost interest in Afghanistan. The CIA adopted a “set-it-and-forget-it” approach after the Soviets were defeated, and they did not fully think through the long-term consequences (Kotarski, 2018).

Overall, the CIA bears greater responsibility. The United States did not directly create the Taliban, but it created a situation that made their rise possible. By providing a large amount of money, weapons, and support to the Afghan mujahideen, the U.S. helped build and strengthen the militant groups. The main U.S. goal was to defeat the Soviet Union. It cared more about winning the Cold War than about which groups were becoming stronger inside Afghanistan. Although Pakistan distributed much of the CIA’s aid, the CIA did not push Pakistan strongly enough to support moderate Afghan groups. Instead, the U.S. turned a blind eye while Pakistan supported the radical Islamist fighters because they were seen more effective against the Soviets. The U.S. also made serious mistakes after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Once the Soviet Union left, the U.S. largely lost interest in Afghanistan. It did not stay to help rebuild the country, create stability, or support peace. Instead, it stepped away and left behind a country full of weapons, armed groups, and deep political divisions. The problem was not only that weapons remained in the hands of militants, but also that the war had produced experienced fighters and militant networks. This made the civil war worse and gave extremist groups the chance to grow. In the end, this instability helped the Taliban come to power in the 1990s.

This is why the idea of “blowback” is useful. The problem was not only that the U.S. supported anti-Soviet fighters. The bigger problem was that it gave money and weapons without properly controlling who benefited and then walked away without helping to manage the situation afterward. A country cannot pour money into armed groups, make them stronger, and then leave

without taking some responsibility for the result. This does not mean Pakistan was not responsible, but without the U.S. money and weapons, these militant networks would probably not have become so strong.

Conclusion

The historical background demonstrates that the U.S. policy failure in Afghanistan did not begin in 2001. Rather, the foundation of those failures was laid in the 1980s, during the anti-Soviet jihad. In its effort to weaken the Soviet Union, the United States provided extensive financial and military assistance to Afghan mujahideen factions, mainly through Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI). Although this facilitated the final Soviet pullout, it also led to the militarization of Afghan society and bolstered various insurgent networks within the country.

After the Soviet Union's withdrawal, the U.S. disengaged from Afghanistan, leaving behind fragile institutions and no international reconstruction assistance. This vacuum contributed to the outbreak of civil war and ultimately facilitated the rise of the Taliban during the mid-1990s. Moreover, the network, fighters, and ideological movements that emerged during the Afghan jihad played an important role in the development of transnational jihadist organizations, including al-Qaeda.

The chapter also shows that the effect of the anti-Soviet jihad did not remain limited to Afghanistan, and the militant networks, fighters, and the methods developed during the war later contributed to transnational terrorism and other forms of blowback. Understanding these historical dynamics is crucial to explaining why later U.S. measures failed to build a viable Afghan state. The next chapter, therefore, examines the post-2001 intervention.

Chapter 3

Overview of U.S. policy in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021

The 20 years of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan were the longest war in American history, spanning four presidential administrations, and ended with the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. Over two decades, U.S. policy shifted from a rapid counterterrorism initiative to extensive nation-building and counterinsurgency efforts, culminating in a negotiated withdrawal. During this period, Congress allocated almost \$145-148 billion specifically for reconstruction, whereas the Department of Defense spent approximately \$837 billion on military operations. The total cost of war is roughly \$2.3 trillion. The human toll was immense: 2,443 US soldiers deceased, 20,666 wounded, 1,144 allied soldiers dead, a minimum of 66,000 Afghan security personnel dead, and around 48,000 Afghan civilians died, and a minimum of 75,000 had been injured (SIGAR, 2021), figures that are widely believed to be underestimates.

The aims of the U.S. evolved, initially focusing on the eradication of al-Qaeda and the removal of the Taliban, later expanded to the establishment of a stable and democratic state in Afghanistan to prevent terrorist groups from securing safe havens, and finally to enable a structural withdrawal of U.S. forces. Despite advancements in healthcare, GDP per capita, and education, attempts largely failed to create lasting institutions. Persistent corruption, instability, impractical timetables, and the absence of a consistent long-term strategy significantly hindered progress, as indicated by internal evaluations. The war became “unwinnable” not because of a singular error, but rather due to deeper structural problems (Whitlock, 2019a).

This chapter provides an overview of U.S. policy in Afghanistan from the initial intervention in 2001 to the final withdrawal in 2021. By examining the major policy decisions taken under the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. Understanding these policies is essential for analyzing the broader structural weaknesses that contributed to the eventual collapse of the Afghan government and return to the Taliban, which will be explained in detail in the following chapter.

The Intervention and the Bush era

The terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 shocked the world and resulted in the death of 2,977 people (Britannica). In response, President George W. Bush described the attacks as an act of war against the United States (Bush, 2002). The Bush administration quickly identified the terrorist organization al-Qaeda as responsible for the attacks. Ten days later, President Bush launched the global “War on Terror,” and demanded that the Taliban regime in Afghanistan hand over all al-Qaeda militants based in the country. When the Taliban declined to comply, the United States, together with the United Kingdom, initiated a military action against Afghanistan on 7 October 2001, under the name “Operation Enduring Freedom” (CFR, 2026).

The initial objectives of the U.S. intervention were deliberately limited in scope. During his 2000 presidential campaign, Bush had expressed reservations about nation-building missions, stating that, “I don’t want to nation-build with troops” (Dodge, 2021). Consequently, the mission was framed primarily as a counterterrorism rather than a nation-building project (Dodge, 2021). The central objective was to dismantle al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban regime that had provided the organization with sanctuary (CFR, 2026).

In discussions within the United States National Security Council (UNSC), policymakers assumed that the American military deployment would be temporary and specifically targeted. Once the Taliban regime had been removed and al-Qaeda dismantled, U.S. forces were expected to withdraw rapidly (Dodge, 2021). This minimalist approach was emphasized by Lakhdar Brahimi, who played a major role in shaping the international strategy for Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban government. As the United Nations Special Representative for Afghanistan, he argued that a large international presence “was neither possible nor desirable” (Dodge, 2021). Instead, Brahimi pushed for a “light footprint” strategy, while helping the local institution to develop their own governing capacity (Dodge, 2021).

On the ground, American military presence in Afghanistan was minimal in the initial months. In December 2001, approximately 1,300 U.S. troops were in country, which grew to 2,500 by the end of December (Press, 2016). Despite this limited footprint, the initial military campaign was extremely successful and achieved rapid success. The Taliban regime fell by November 2001 (CFR, 2026). Following the fall of the Taliban, efforts began to establish a new political order. By December 2001, an interim administration was established under the Bonn Agreement, with Hamid Karzai emerging as the country’s interim leader, and later became president (SIGAR, 2021).

[The shift to nation-building](#)

June 2003 represented a crucial turning point in U.S. policy. Following the Taliban’s removal from power and the failure to capture Bin Laden at Tora Bora, the focus of the war shifted to American-led nation-building (Valenta & Valenta, 2017). The American policymakers realized that limited counterterrorism would be insufficient to stabilize Afghanistan. This transition marked the beginning of a prolonged international effort aimed at promoting political and economic reforms and transforming Afghanistan’s

system of governance from dictatorship to a democratic state. President Bush, who had earlier voiced skepticism about using military forces for nation-building, revised his stance. He later characterized the mission in Afghanistan as the “ultimate nation-building mission,” underscoring the gravity of the task at hand (Valenta & Valenta, 2017). The mission aimed to establish stable, democratic governance capable of maintaining security and preventing terrorist groups from establishing safe havens.

This policy shift was accompanied by a substantial increase in resources. In October 2003, the UNSC Resolution 1510 authorized the International Security Assistance Force to extend its operations beyond Kabul and operate throughout the country. When the U.S. Congress approved an \$87 billion funding package in November 2003, approximately \$11 billion of the total was designated for reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan (Dodge, 2021). This funding was designated to support infrastructure development, establish government institutions, and train Afghan security personnel.

Despite these efforts, the nation-building project encountered serious obstacles. By 2008, the Taliban insurgency had intensified, the administration remained unstable and corrupt, and nation-building efforts had made minimal progress. Despite the investment of billions of dollars and the loss of thousands of lives, the U.S.-led initiatives to radically change Afghanistan into a stable democratic state produced minimal results (Dodge, 2021).

These challenges highlighted the inherent complexity of establishing a stable state in Afghanistan during the Bush administration and continued to pose difficulties for subsequent U.S. administrations. These initiatives set the stage for follow-on efforts by later administrations. As Herring and Barracks note, “the cost of combating a terrorist organization, coupled with a nation-building effort, was indeed considerable for the U.S.” (Herring, 2003, p. 18).

It became clear that attaining an enduring solution demanded a prolonged effort, signaling that the U.S. needed to prepare for an extended, global campaign against terrorism.

The Obama era: The Surge and Counterinsurgency

In early 2009, a new administration took office in the U.S. amid growing public fatigue after years of conflict. President Barack Obama was dedicated to bringing an end to America's involvement in the post 9/11 conflict and acknowledged the urgent need to take decisive action (Berdal, 2016, p.165). On February 17, 2009, the Obama administration deployed 17,000 additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan. The objective was to intensify efforts to eliminate al-Qaeda and avert its reemergence in the region (Berdal, 2016, p.165). This decision demonstrated an early emphasis on averting al-Qaeda's resurgence in the region.

Shortly afterward, on March 27, 2009, President Obama publicly announced a new strategy for the military efforts, linking success in Afghanistan to stability in Pakistan. The revised central objective, as detailed in an interagency White Paper, was to dismantle, disrupt, and defeat al-Qaeda and its shelters in Pakistan, while preventing its resurgence in Pakistan or Afghanistan (P. D. Miller, 2020).

A key shift in the new administration's view of the war occurred in August 2009, when General Stanley McChrystal, recently appointed commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), presented a comprehensive assessment of the situation (P. D. Miller, 2020). His evaluation emphasized the severity of conditions in Afghanistan, highlighting signs that the security environment was deteriorating and many Afghans were losing confidence in both their own government and the international presence supporting it (P. D. Miller, 2020). This assessment triggered a comprehensive reconsideration of the war's objectives. As a

result, a second strategy review was conducted at White House, where Obama had a strategic choice between a focused counterterrorism operation or a more extensive counterinsurgency initiative against the Taliban, including strengthening the Afghan administration (P. D. Miller, 2020). In pursuit of a balanced approach, Obama adopted a compromise strategy (P. D. Miller, 2020). While prioritizing the disruption of al-Qaeda, he also authorized a significant troop increase in order to stabilize the country.

In December 2009, after a comprehensive strategy evaluation, Obama announced a troop surge, the deployment of an additional 30,000 U.S. troops, increasing the total American military presence to approximately 100,000. This represented the most extensive deployment of U.S. personnel, both military and civilian, throughout the whole conflict in Afghanistan (“Obama-Era Afghanistan War Surge Debated,” 2025). The strategy was based on counterinsurgency doctrine, asserting that safeguarding civilians and establishing legitimate authority were crucial for overcoming the insurgency.

Alongside the military surge, the administration launched a significant “civilian surge.” Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, who held the position of U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan from 2009 to 2011, oversaw triple the number of civilian increases from 320 in 2009 to 1,261 by 2011 (“Obama-Era Afghanistan War Surge Debated,” 2025). Civilians were assigned to Provincial Reconstruction teams and district support teams. Their role was to expedite development, enhance governance, and foster local capability.

At the same time, the Obama administration also sought to create a pathway for eventual withdrawal. In accordance with the president’s directions, a group of White House staff in 2010 began developing an “Afghan good enough” approach and departure strategy, designed to pave the way for a U.S. withdrawal (P. D. Miller, 2020). On June 22, 2011, President Obama officially announced plans for troop withdrawal. He aimed to bring home

10,000 by the end of 2011 and 33,000 total by summer 2012 (Sabochik, 2011). This announcement came just weeks after the assassination of al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden by U.S. forces in Pakistan in 2011, a major development in the ongoing conflict. The elimination of the U.S. main target intensified the debate over whether to continue the military campaign in Afghanistan.

In his second term, President Obama implemented a more sophisticated strategy in Afghanistan, combining the gradual troop withdrawal with the transfer of security responsibilities to Afghan forces. The drawdown was enforced by the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), which provided a legal foundation for ongoing U.S. military presence and financial assistance. However, serious challenges remained, the Afghan security forces estimated to be roughly 300,000, are considerably understaffed, and only about one-sixth of that number was actually operational (Gibbons-Neff et al., 2021).

By 2012, NATO officially transferred primary security responsibility to Afghan forces as part of a broader transition agreed upon at the 2010 NATO Lisbon Summit. This process culminated in 2014 with the completion of transition (Inteqal), marked by the end of NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission and full handover of security responsibility to the Afghan National Security Forces (NATO, 2022). The function of U.S. and NATO forces shifted from direct combat to advising, training, and executing counterterrorism operations (NATO, 2022). Consequently, U.S. force numbers decreased from their surge level to approximately 10,000 by 2015 (Malkasian, 2021, p. 395) illustrating the Obama administration's broader strategy of transferring responsibility to Afghan institutions while sustaining a limited presence.

During this period, U.S. public statements remained optimistic about the capabilities of Afghan forces. However, internal reports later raised serious

doubts regarding the sustainability of Afghan institutions and the effectiveness of the security forces (Benjamin & Davies, 2019).

At the same time, diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflicts through negotiations began to take shape. In 2013, the Taliban established a political office in Doha, Qatar, to facilitate preliminary talks among the Taliban, the Afghan government, and international actors (BBC, 2013). Although these early negotiations delivered limited progress, they signaled the start of a diplomatic path that would eventually lead to the 2020 Doha agreement between the United States and the Taliban.

The Trump era and the Doha agreement

When Donald Trump took office in 2017, he voiced strong dissatisfaction with what he described as the U.S. “forever war.” During the 2016 presidential campaign, he openly questioned the value of maintaining a prolonged American military commitment there (Khattak, 2019). This rhetoric suggested that Trump would move quickly toward withdrawal, but his actual policy proved more complicated.

In an August 2017 address, he acknowledged that although his initial inclination had been to withdraw all U.S. forces from Afghanistan, the realities on the ground made such move unfeasible. He adopted a condition-based strategy. Trump stated that the duration of the American presence would remain open-ended, emphasizing that the future decision would be guided by “conditions on the ground.” In an interview with *The New York Times*, Donald Trump acknowledged his internal dilemma regarding the war in Afghanistan. He explained, “My initial inclinations were to withdraw.... And historically, I tend to adhere to my instinct. However, throughout my life, I have been told that decisions change significantly when one occupies the Oval Office” (Dombrowski & Reich, 2018, p. 69).

The most important event of the Trump administration was the negotiation of a peace agreement with the Taliban. In February 2020, the U.S. signed the Doha Agreement with the Taliban in Qatar, notably without the participation of the Afghan government. The agreement set a deadline for the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan by May 2021 (Doha Agreement, 2020). In return, the Taliban pledged to prevent al-Qaeda from functioning in areas under their control and agreed to take part in negotiations with the Afghan government. The Doha Agreement also included the release of approximately 5,000 Taliban detainees to foster trust (Doha Agreement, 2020).

This agreement represented a significant shift in U.S. policy. By engaging in direct negotiations with the Taliban and excluding the Afghan government, the U.S. effectively acknowledged the Taliban as a legitimate political actor while sidelining the government it had backed for nearly two decades.

However, the Doha agreement has drawn severe criticism from multiple political factions. Lisa Curtis, former senior director for South and Central Asia at the National Security Council, called it a “very weak” agreement that “conceded far too much” to the Taliban (Mohammadi, 2025). Curtis testified that “this was comparable to presenting the country to the Taliban as if it were a birthday cake” (Mohammadi, 2025). Many of release Taliban detainees rejoined the fight against the Afghan government (Mohammadi, 2025).

The Biden withdrawal and Taliban return

Joe Biden took office in January 2021. He launched the full withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan, implementing the terms of the agreement reached under the Donald Trump administration with the Taliban. In April 2021, Biden announced that all remaining U.S. troops

would leave the country by September 11, 2021 (Biden, 2021), extending the May deadline slightly.

The withdrawal proceeded rapidly. By July 2021, 95 percent of forces had withdrawn, leaving around 650 for embassy security (CFR, 2026). Following the withdrawal of forces, the Taliban initiated a nationwide attack, seizing provincial capitals with minimal opposition. On August 15, 2021, Taliban militants seized Kabul as President Ghani fled the country. The American-supported administration, established over two decades at an expenditure of \$145 billion for reconstruction and \$837 billion for military operations, disintegrated within days (Dodge, 2021, p. 18).

NPR's report emphasized that the Afghan army, which was established, trained, and equipped by the U.S. was largely left unsupported by its own government (Elving, 2021). Deprived of essential supplies and support, the Afghan army surrendered territory to the Taliban with minimal resistance. This reflected a broader lack of loyalty to the elected Afghan government, whose leader fled the country before the Taliban's takeover (Ramirez, 2024). The Afghan government's quick fall and the Taliban's quick rise to power in August 2021 made some question the long-term effects of U.S. policy.

Critics contended that Biden was not obligated by the Trump agreement. Lisa Curtis remarked, "President Biden stated that he was constrained by the agreement and obligated to comply with it." He was not obligated to retain Zalmay Khalilzad as his negotiator, which he did until September 2021, now, he did not have to adhere to that arrangement. He might have negotiated a new agreement" (Mohammadi, 2025).

Conclusion

The evolution of U.S. policy in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 demonstrates how a limited counterterrorism intervention gradually evolved over time. Successive U.S. administrations responded to changing conditions with different approaches. The Bush administration oversaw the transition from counterterrorism to nation-building, allocating significant funding to the development of Afghan political institutions and security forces. The Obama administration tried to stabilize the deteriorating security through a troop surge and counterinsurgency strategy, while also planning a gradual withdrawal. The Trump administration shifted toward negotiations with the Taliban, resulting in the Doha Agreement, which outlined the framework for the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces. Finally, the Biden administration executed the final withdrawal in 2021, concluding two decades of American engagement in Afghanistan.

Despite massive financial investment, military intervention, and international backing, these strategies ultimately failed to create a stable, self-sustaining Afghan state. The rapid collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021 underscored the vulnerability of the institutions established over the two decades and raised significant questions about the effectiveness of the overall strategy.

These shifting policies impacted the conflict's trajectory and contributed to the conditions that eventually led to the fall of the Afghan government. The next chapter, therefore, examines the key structural and strategic policy failures that help explain why the U.S. mission in Afghanistan was ultimately unsuccessful.

Chapter 4

U.S. Policy Failures

The United States twenty-year intervention in Afghanistan, launched in 2001 after the 9/11 attacks, ended in failure. Afghanistan has long been known as the “graveyard of empires.” It has a long history of resisting external powers such as Alexander the Great, the British in the nineteenth century, and the Soviets in the 1980s (Williams, 2022). Despite this historical precedent, Americans believed they were different, but they encountered similar problems: a limited understanding of Afghan society and culture, and the imposition of a highly centralized system of governance (Shah, 2021).

The human and material cost of the war was immense. A total of 2,455 U.S. soldiers died, and 20,740 were wounded (Crawford, 2021). At the same time, over 46,000 Afghan civilians lost their lives. By the end of 2020, more than 2.2 million Afghans were living as refugees in Iran and Pakistan, while more than half a million had been displaced within Afghanistan itself (Crawford, 2021). According to the United Nations, the humanitarian crisis worsened further, reporting that in 2021, one-third of people left in Afghanistan were malnourished, and around half of the children under the age of five suffered from malnutrition (Crawford, 2021). On the financial side, the war had cost the United States over \$2.3 trillion (Crawford, 2021), raising serious concerns about the effectiveness and sustainability of the intervention.

Beyond these measurable costs, the intervention also triggered a rapid and externally imposed transformation in Afghan society. A U.S. diplomat, Michael Metrisko, stated that “Afghanistan had gone from medieval times to modern times” in just a few years. That was “too much too soon” (Williams, 2022). It shocked and upset many Afghans, who did not like the

change forced on them by external powers (Williams, 2022). This disconnect between external ambitions and local realities would become a recurring feature of U.S. policy, as U.S. efforts consistently sought to transform Afghanistan through centralized governance, a formal justice system, and social reforms without adequately accounting for the country's decentralized tribal structure and reliance on informal institutions, such as jirgas and shuras (Murtazashvili, 2022). These changes bypassed local authority figures and disrupted the traditional power balance, causing many Afghans to disengage from state institutions, undermining the legitimacy of the government (Murtazashvili, 2022).

This chapter argues that the failure of U.S. intervention was not the result of a single miscalculation, but rather a combination of interconnected policy failures. It explores how early strategic choices, the diversion of attention to Iraq, shifting and expanding objectives, unmonitored aid, disregard for local realities, external sanctuary for the Taliban, and the flawed withdrawal combined to undermine the entire United States effort. Together, these factors reveal a pattern of misalignment between U.S. ambitions and Afghan realities, ultimately leading to the collapse of the U.S. mission.

Iraq war diversion

It is widely acknowledged that the Bush administration neglected the Afghanistan mission in favor of the Iraq war starting in 2003. This strategic decision redirected essential U.S. resources, including funding, troop deployments, intelligence assets, and high-level political attention, during Afghanistan's most vulnerable post-invasion phase (SIGAR, 2021). Former officials later admitted that the Bush administration "recognized the necessity to allocate more resources to [Iraq or Afghanistan], ultimately selecting Iraq due to the more rapid deterioration of the situation there... resulting in several years of calculated neglect in Afghanistan, and that was

intentional” (SIGAR, 2021, p. 81). As Craig Whitlock observes, Washington stopped paying attention to Afghanistan and became preoccupied with another country in the region, Iraq (Whitlock, 2021, p. 27).

The deployment of U.S. troops clearly demonstrates the transition. In fiscal year 2002, the average number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan was approximately 5,200, with no personnel deployed in Iraq. By fiscal year 2003, the number of troops in Afghanistan increased to 10,400, whereas Iraq’s troop count reached 67,700. The disparity significantly increased. Fiscal year 2004 recorded 15,200 in Afghanistan compared to 130,600 in Iraq, by FY2005: 19,100 versus 143,800, and for FY2008: 30,100 in Afghanistan and reaching a peak of 157,800 in Iraq (CRS, 2009). This shows the significant transition to Iraq, leaving Afghanistan with a “light footprint” (Barfield, 2022, p. 313). That was insufficient for stabilization.

This diversion created two major problems. First, there were not enough troops or money to make the available forces strong enough to protect the country. Up until early 2007, there was only one U.S. combat brigade team in charge (Dale, 2011, p. 27). The coalition and Afghan forces were similarly strained, unable to ensure security in every town and village, due to terrain and population dispersion (West, 2011, p. 90). This security vacuum enabled the Taliban to regroup with little resistance in Pakistan’s border region from 2003 onward, ultimately launching a nationwide insurgency by 2006 (Barfield, 2022, pp. 310-320).

Second, the mission shifted toward a predominantly military, counter-terrorism approach, already underfunded, while neglecting governance, reconstruction, and the development of Afghan-led security. The initial goals, “disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base... and attack the military capability of the Taliban regime” (B. R. Rubin, 2007), were achieved quickly with the fall of the Taliban in late 2001. Instead of

consolidating those successes, Washington redirected its attention to Baghdad. This shift diverted crucial military and intelligence resources, leading to what an official later described as the “under-resourced and under-planned postwar initiatives” (Azizian, 2021). Consequently, the Taliban and al-Qaeda got the space to rebuild and regroup. A 2021 Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs analysis observed that the Taliban were “regenerating and building strength while the U.S. became preoccupied with the Iraq war, draining most of its attention and resources” (Azizian, 2021).

Critical opportunities during the 2002-2005 period, when the Taliban were at their most vulnerable, were wasted. The U.S. failed to deploy sufficient soldiers, funding, and political attention to stabilize Afghanistan. More than a year passed after the initial invasion before substantial resources were invested in building Afghan security forces, by which time the insurgency had already begun to gain momentum. This delay was pivotal, as recruitment and training of Afghan soldiers and police lagged significantly behind operational needs (Azizian, 2021).

The repercussions were especially damaging for the Afghan National Security Forces, notably the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP). The ANP faced significant challenges because of ongoing inadequacies in training, equipment, salaries, and oversight, resulting in a high desertion rate, systemic corruption, and profound mistrust within the local population (Schurter, 2012). At the same time, the ANA development advanced slowly as the mentor and resources were diverted elsewhere. In 2009, the Government Accountability Office cautioned that “the availability and training of personnel will be a critical consideration as the force is already significantly strained from ongoing operations, and currently training capacity has been predominantly directed toward operations in Iraq” (GAO, 2009). By 2010, shortfalls persisted: “275 of

1,495 institutional trainers and 41 of 205 embedded teams were missing for ANA alone” (Dale, 2011, p. 44).

Overall, the prioritization of the Iraq war, driven by the belief in the presence of weapons of mass destruction and expansive “war on terror” goals, led to opportunity costs that undermined stability in Afghanistan. A stronger early commitment to troop levels, better training for the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, and focused efforts to develop governance could have slowed the insurgency's momentum and decreased the long-term dependence on foreign support.

The absence of clear and consistent objectives

The lack of clear and consistent objectives was one of the most fundamental and persistent shortcomings in U.S. policy toward Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. Over the course of two decades, the mission’s objectives shifted repeatedly, from counterterrorism to counterinsurgency and from state-building to an exit strategy, leading to confusion and strategic disarray (Herd, 2021).

Initially, in late 2001, the objective was clear and specific: to eradicate al-Qaeda and to overthrow the Taliban regime that had provided sanctuary to the terrorist network (Azizian, 2021). This was a relatively straightforward military objective that was achieved quickly by late 2001. The leadership of the Taliban and al-Qaeda had been killed, detained, or forced into hiding, but then the U.S. government made a critical mistake that it would subsequently repeat (Whitlock, 2019b). After the Taliban regime fell, the U.S. broadened its objectives to include establishing a friendly government and preventing al-Qaeda from returning. What commenced as a focused counterterrorism operation has transformed into one of the most ambitious state-building initiatives in history (Whitlock, 2019b).

The Washington Post’s 2019 investigative series, “The Afghanistan Papers,” based on multiple confidential interviews, distinctly illustrates this confusion. Senior officials acknowledged that the U.S. was “stranded without a strategy,” as conflicting objectives hindered the war from the outset. Interviews indicated that the Bush and Obama administrations adopted polar-opposite strategies. Bush’s focused counterterrorism transitioning to Obama’s broad nation-building, yet both were destined to fail due to mismatched ends and means (Whitlock, 2019b). An official remarked that the goal evolved beyond defeating al-Qaeda, covering aspects such as women’s rights and extensive state-building, yet lacked a definitive strategy for success. Richards Boucher, former senior diplomat at the State Department for South Asia, saw it as the ultimate example of mission creep; “we are trying to achieve the unachievable instead of achieving the achievable” (Whitlock, 2019b).

[Attempting too much: The Centralized Western Model](#)

A key manifestation of these shifting objectives was the attempt to build a strong, centralized government. The 2001 Bonn agreement created a centralized transitional administration heavily influenced by the Western powers, emphasizing a strong Kabul-based government rather than incorporating existing traditional institutions such as jirgas and shuras. This approach overlooked Afghanistan’s longstanding pattern of weak central authority, counterbalanced by strong local and tribal networks, in which legitimacy originates in rural communities rather than in a distant capital (Barfield, 2022).

The 2004 Constitution institutionalized an intensely centralized system of government, concentrating substantial executive power in Kabul while providing citizens with few effective mechanisms for accountability. This arrangement reinforced perceptions of the state as distant, unresponsive, and

deeply corrupt (Murtazashvili, 2022). According to The Diplomat's post-collapse analysis, "Afghanistan's historical experience demonstrates that a centralized system of governance has repeatedly led to corruption, ethnic tensions, and a governance accountability to all its citizens" (Shah, 2021).

The effects of centralized governance were particularly visible in the justice sector. The U.S. invested roughly \$900 million in establishing a formal legal system based on Western models, including courts, judges, and prosecutors (Hamid, 2021). Unfortunately, Afghans do not appear to have been impressed. The formal system was often perceived as slow, corrupt, expensive, and inaccessible, particularly in rural areas, where 80-90 percent of dispute resolved through informal mechanisms such as jirgas and shuras (SIGAR, 2021). As a result, initiatives achieved limited success, primarily because they failed to reflect local preferences, and many Afghans continued to rely on traditional dispute-resolution methods.

Afghanistan's historically decentralized political structure, rooted in customary practices, was incompatible with the principles of the modern state, including gender equality and formal democratic institutions. At the local level, Afghanistan maintained a robust system of informal governance that delivered public goods and services and, crucially, provided communities with space to deliberate and address common issues (Murtazashvili, 2022). These structures were typically based on long-standing traditions, including council-like shuras and jirgas, and were led by local leaders such as maliks, wakils, or arbabs (Murtazashvili, 2022). Over decades of conflict, these customary systems of authority demonstrated remarkable resilience, adopting and evolving rather than fading away. In villages across the country, communities increasingly expected more from their traditional leaders, who responded by adjusting to these demands. At the height of U.S. state-building efforts, Trust in traditional authorities was

not only strong but exceeded trust in any other governing institution in Afghanistan (Murtazashvili, 2022).

Development initiatives expanded into sectors such as agriculture, energy, mining, and infrastructure, often with limited input from the Afghans themselves. The U.S. agriculture assistance strategy promoted rapid modernization that overlooked the traditional organization of Afghan farming, similarly, mining, and resource extraction projects, while expected to generate revenue, produced a system and infrastructure that Afghans were unlikely to sustain independently after U.S. withdrawal. All these efforts reflected genuine “goodwill” yet also displayed “a certain obliviousness” (Dale, 2011, p. 67).

The broader strategic failure was marked by “shifting objectives that were not matched by the resources”, alongside an “overconfidence in pursuing large-scale state-building efforts without local legitimacy” (Azizian, 2021). Together, these factors contributed to a state that lacked both institutional resilience and popular legitimacy.

Systemic Corruption

U.S.-led reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan after 2001 directed over \$140-148 billion into the country across two decades, aiming to establish a stable and self-sufficient government capable of countering the Taliban (Novelly, 2025). However, the vast flow of funds, with limited oversight, ultimately fostered widespread corruption that undermined the mission.

Systemic corruption emerged as one of the most consequential and self-reinforcing failures of U.S. intervention. It took years for the U.S. to realize that its excessive spending, combined with weak oversight, was actually contributing to corruption. According to SIGAR’s lessons learned reports, the U.S. originally failed to recognize corruption as an existential threat and

only later understood that “injecting billions of dollars into the Afghan economy” through “flawed oversight and contracting practices” was making the situation worse (SIGAR, 2021).

Importantly, corruption in Afghanistan was not simply a cultural phenomenon but was deeply embedded in the political and institutional system established after 2001. The massive flow of foreign aid put enormous strain on already vulnerable institutions. Instead of improving governance, these resources frequently encouraged systemic corruption, allowing patronage networks and elite capture to flourish (SIGAR, 2016).

How corruption functioned

Corruption in Afghanistan operated as a core feature of governance rather than a deviation from it. As Arne Strand noted in his 2022 analysis, an Afghan colleague remarked that “in Afghanistan, corruption is governance,” reflecting how it functioned as a mechanism of control for elite networks (Strand, 2022).

Afghanistan government was good at resource extraction through taxes, bribes, and foreign aid, but it was terrible at providing services like education, healthcare, and security. Sarah Chayes, an expert, said the Afghan government was not really a government at all, it was like a criminal organization. Its main job was to extract resources for personal gain. Money flowed upward, lower officials paid bribes to higher officials, all the way to President Karzai. In return, the top permitted them to extract resources and protection from punishment (Williams, 2022). This structure aligns with what Moises Naim called a “mafia state,” where public office is used primarily for private gain (Williams, 2022).

Michael Metrisko, a former U.S. diplomat, stated that Afghanistan’s lack of a proper taxation and pension system meant that police, politicians, and

officials saw their jobs as an opportunity to enrich themselves. They went into public service to make money, not to serve the country (Williams, 2022). The broader structural conditions for corruption were also present. As Robert Klitgaard noted, corruption tends to arise where there is concentrated power, discretion, and limited or no accountability. All three things were present in Afghanistan (Williams, 2022).

Why U.S. anti-corruption efforts failed:

U.S. efforts to address corruption proved largely ineffective due to a combination of structural and strategic shortcomings. Firstly, corruption directly undermined the broader mission by eroding public trust. As SIGAR notes, “corruption undermined the U.S. mission in Afghanistan by fueling grievances against the Afghan government and channeling material support to the insurgency” (SIGAR, 2016). In practice, corruption weakened public trust in government institutions, with ordinary Afghans routinely witnessing bribery, abuse of authority, and unequal access to justice. These events contribute to the notion that the government was illegitimate and self-serving, eroding its authority and allowing the Taliban to position themselves as a more respectable alternative.

Second, probably more important, according to the report, “the U.S. contributed to the growth of corruption by injecting billions of dollars into the Afghan economy, using flawed oversight and contracting practices, and partnering with malign powerbrokers” (SIGAR, 2016). The rapid influx of aid overwhelmed Afghanistan’s minimal institutional capacity, making effective monitoring and accountability extremely challenging.

A third significant feature emphasized is that anti-corruption initiatives were inconsistent and frequently subordinated to other strategic objectives, especially security issues (SIGAR, 2016). U.S. authorities often hesitated to

challenge corrupt Afghan officials if it jeopardized local alliances or compromised counterinsurgency efforts (SIGAR, 2016). This made it possible for corruption to be accepted or even disregarded when it was seen as useful for politics or the military. As a result, efforts to fight corruption lacked credibility.

Fourth, the report stresses that U.S. leaders misjudged the impact of corruption on the broader objective. Corruption was frequently regarded as a peripheral concern rather than a primary strategic challenge. And finally, the US efforts to combat corruption were poorly coordinated. Multiple agencies pursued different strategies without a unified approach (SIGAR, 2016).

By the end, SIGAR's final report documented more than 1,300 instances of fraud, waste, and abuse totaling \$26-29 billion, roughly one-fifth of the approximately \$145 billion in reconstruction funds lost to corruption, abuse, and mismanagement (Levin, 2025).

Consequences and legitimacy crisis:

The consequences of systemic corruption were profound. By 2021, Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index ranked Afghanistan 174 out of 180 countries for corruption (CPI, 2021). Citizens often have to pay bribes for basic services such as registering marriages and births, shop registrations, land registration, obtaining identity cards, and even accessing public utilities. Corruption did not just rob the poor, it destroyed trust. When people earning less than \$2 a day had to bribe for basic services, they lost confidence in the system. They started looking for other providers of security and welfare. That made the Taliban's alternative governance more appealing to many (Williams, 2022).

More fundamentally, the Afghan government lacked accountability to its people. Instead, it depended primarily on international donors, which eroded its legitimacy in the eyes of Afghan society (Williams, 2022). The U.S. led state-building efforts focused on enhancing state capacity while neglecting to impose effective limits on state power. Ordinary Afghans had little influence over who governed them and how decisions were made. Tragically, Afghans were largely sidelined, never given a genuine opportunity to shape their country's future (Murtazashvili, 2022).

NGOs and the U.S. Special Inspector General (SIGAR) wrote many reports warning about corruption, but no one acted on them for almost twenty years. When U.S. financial support withdrew, the Afghan government collapsed like a “house of cards” because almost no one was willing to fight for a government that was corrupt and forced on them (Williams, 2022).

In the end, money cannot win hearts and minds. Building trust did not require vast sums of money, complex strategies, or advanced military planning. It requires respecting people and giving them a chance to participate as active citizens (Murtazashvili, 2022).

Neglect of Local Context and Traditional Structures

The limitations of the U.S. state-building approach were significantly compounded by a failure to account for the country’s local political, social, and cultural realities. U.S. authorities followed a top-down governance model that favored the imposition of Western institutional frameworks while largely ignoring the tribal, rural, and informal traditions that historically shaped Afghan culture. As a result, the newly formed state lacked legitimacy among the mostly rural population, failing to create confidence and allowing the Taliban to maintain a parallel system of government and influence on a local level.

As Shadi Hamid observes, “Americans never understood Afghanistan as the Taliban did.” Rather than seeing local traditions as possible sources of legitimacy, U.S. authorities instead viewed them as an impediment to modernity. Substantial investments were allocated to efforts to enhance Afghan society, including nearly \$1 billion for female initiatives and \$900 million to improve the formal justice system (Hamid, 2021). However, these efforts lacked cultural sensitivity and failed to align with local norms. The formal justice system, modeled after Western institutions, was largely unfamiliar to most Afghans, who preferred informal, community-based dispute-resolution methods through which around 80 to 90 percent of civil cases have traditionally been resolved (SIGAR, 2021).

The disconnect was further exacerbated by the dismissal of the traditional system as irrelevant. A former USAID official admitted that traditional justice systems were widely rejected because “we thought they did not have any relevance.” In contrast, the Taliban provided “rough and ready” justice based on local norms, which many Afghans felt was more approachable and trustworthy than the formal system, which was frequently viewed as corrupt and disconnected from everyday realities (Hamid, 2021).

Similarly, Scott underscores the dangerous assumptions and cultural incompetence that shaped U.S. policy. The American strategy often relied on ethnocentric beliefs that the Western political model could be replicated in Afghanistan. This approach neglected the critical role of informal institutions, such as jirgas and shuras, in conflict resolution and decision-making. Instead, many training programs and military activities treated Afghan culture as a blank slate and disregarded established power dynamics (Edmondson, 2021). Even initiatives like the Human Terrain System, which intended to incorporate cultural understanding into military operations, were

only partially successful, indicating a greater failure among U.S. planners to critically analyze their own assumptions (Edmondson, 2021).

At the same time, the U.S. state-building strategy consistently emphasized service delivery rather than developing Afghan capacity to sustain those services. As Sigar's final report concluded, the withdrawal of U.S. forces "laid bare just how hollow the alleged progress had been," exposing the Afghan state's profound vulnerabilities and fragility (Mahshie, 2021). Despite the \$83 billion investment, the Afghan national defense and security forces were "not able to provide nationwide security" after the coalition forces' withdrawal (Mahshie, 2021).

Overall, the failure to incorporate local context and foster Afghan ownership compromised both the legitimacy and sustainability of the state-building project. This weakness in legitimacy and ownership was exploited by a resilient Taliban movement, supported from across the border.

Taliban Resilience and External Support: The Role of Pakistan

During the two decades of conflict, the Taliban demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to adapt, endure, and resurge despite facing the world's most powerful military coalition and ultimately regaining control of Afghanistan in 2021. This resilience was not solely due to internal organizational strength, but emerged from the combination of local adaptability, effective governance strategies, and most importantly, external support, especially from Pakistan. As the Center for Strategic and International Studies stated, the U.S. failure to eliminate Taliban's safe haven in Pakistan may represent one of Washington's most significant strategic errors (Jones, 2018).

Pakistan's role was central yet deeply contradictory. It played a "double game." On the one hand, it presented itself as a key ally to the United States

in the post 9/11 War on Terror (Lynch, 2018) by providing logistic support, access to air bases, and intelligence cooperation. On the other hand, Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) continued to support the Afghan Taliban and affiliated groups by providing them safe havens, funding, and training (Lynch, 2018). This duplicity aided Taliban resilience, prolonged the battle, and hindered the U.S. counterinsurgency and nation-building efforts.

Organizational adaptation and phases of Taliban resurgence:

Following the removal from power in 2001, Taliban leaders fled to Pakistan, where the Taliban reorganized into decentralized regional networks (Slattery, 2024), operating from Pakistan's regions such as Federal Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Balochistan, and major cities such as Quetta (Waldman, 2010). In March 2003, the Taliban formed a leadership council in Quetta. The Taliban calls it the Rahbari Shura, although it is better known as the Quetta Shura in the West (Farrell, 2018), to bring together different factions while maintaining their local independence.

The Quetta Shura functioned with relative freedom under the watch of ISI. ISI maintains representatives within the Shura, either as active participants or as observers. Even a limited ISI presence would enable them to closely monitor the Shura's decision (Waldman, 2010, p.6). This pattern continued even as U.S. and NATO forces carried out ongoing military operations within Afghanistan (Waldman, 2010). Between 2003 and 2004, the ISI was reportedly running training camps for the Taliban recruits and facilitating the flow of funding, weapons, and equipment. The Pakistan military also provided medical support to the Taliban fighters, and it further revealed coordination between Taliban commanders and Pakistan military officials to ensure safe cross-border movement (Waldman, 2010, p. 13). By 2005, after three years of working in secret, the Taliban started to take back territories,

and by 2006, the Taliban insurgency had successfully reconstituted itself (Slattery, 2024).

The insurgency phase (2006-2021) was marked by increasing sophistication. The Taliban established a parallel governance structure, including provincial and district-level “shadow governance” and twelve national commissions covering areas such as politics, military, culture, finance, health, and justice (Farrell, 2018). These commissions helped them to connect with local people by providing support like services and security, which the Afghan government often failed to provide (Slattery, 2024). The new Afghan government focused on cities and ignored rural areas. People in the countryside were angry, and the Taliban used that anger to gain support (Slattery, 2024). Over time, the Taliban evolved from a fragmented insurgent movement into a more unified and organized militant force, developing a strong central leadership (Slattery, 2024).

By the late 2000s, some areas had no real government presence, so the Taliban stepped in and set up their own rule. In some places, they did not even have full control of the land, just having strong military influence was enough to enforce their shadow government (Slattery, 2024). These shadow governments played a critical role in building legitimacy. It provided services that the official government was not offering, like health care, education, and a justice system. They resolved local conflicts, met people’s needs, and gained public support. Their courts and conflict-resolution systems became well established (Slattery, 2024). In 2009, Taliban courts remained popular because, unlike official Afghan courts, they offered accessible, swift, and corruption-free justice (Farrell, 2018). These parallel institutions reinforce the application of Sharia law and help establish local legitimacy, allowing the Taliban to exercise governance without formal state authority (Slattery, 2024).

Pakistan was providing support to the Taliban without being directly exposed by the United States. However, Pakistan's support for the Taliban did not go unnoticed, and in 2006, the U.S. government accounted Pakistan for the first time of backing Taliban (Bacon, 2018). Pakistan had a complicated and hidden relationship with the Taliban. It tries to deny supporting them, especially to the U.S., and to manage the pressure, Pakistan sometimes carries out fake or symbolic crackdowns, for example, arresting Taliban members temporarily and then releasing them later (Bacon, 2018).

Without Pakistan's support, the Taliban would likely not have been able to recover. A NATO study published in 2012, analyzing more than 27,000 interrogations of about 4,000 captured Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other fighters, found that ISI assistance was crucial to the Taliban's survival and resurgence after 2001, just as it had been during their rise to power in the 1990s (Riedel, 2013). There were also reports that Pakistani officers were being killed in Afghanistan while operating covertly alongside Taliban forces. The report concluded that ISI also had knowledge of Taliban operations, activities, and the whereabouts of all senior leadership (Riedel, 2013). Despite growing awareness of this relationship, the U.S. response remained limited and inconsistent.

In July 2017, President Donald Trump stated that "Pakistan frequently provides safe havens to agents of chaos and violence and terror." In 2018, Trump went even further, stating that the U.S. has "foolishly given Pakistan more than \$33 billion in aid over the last 15 years," with little in return (Jones, 2018). Trump announced to freeze the aid for Pakistan, but when the Trump administration made its move, Pakistan's influence over the Taliban was already weaker than before. Pakistan had the most influence over the Taliban when the Taliban was weak, but it has now gone down (Bacon, 2018).

Pakistan viewed its support for the Taliban as a strategic necessity. After feeling abandoned by the United States following the Soviet war, it supported the Taliban throughout Afghanistan's civil war to maintain border stability. When the U.S. returned after 9/11, Pakistan cooperated but remained cautious, anticipating another U.S. pullout, and therefore, it maintained relations with the Taliban (Crocker, 2021). Pakistan sees it as crucial to have a friendly government in Afghanistan. It has long accused India of attempting to exploit Pakistan's ethnic and linguistic divisions to weaken and fragment the state (M. C. Miller, 2021), particularly in regions such as Balochistan, which borders Afghanistan. When Afghanistan was led by Ashraf Ghani, its close relations with India made Pakistan uncomfortable, and they believed that if the Taliban-led government came to power, it would limit India's influence in Afghanistan (M. C. Miller, 2021). And second, Pakistan authorities were concerned about their border with Afghanistan and viewed a Taliban led government as a potential way to reduce these anxieties. Since 1947, successive Afghan governments have refused to recognize the Durand line, the boundary line dividing Pakistan's Pashtun-majority regions from Afghanistan. Afghanistan, where the Pashtun are the largest ethnic group, has historically claimed these areas as part of a broader "Pashtunistan" (M. C. Miller, 2021). Even when the Taliban held power, they refused to acknowledge the Durand Line as the official border between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Bacon, 2018). In contrast, Pakistan believes that the Taliban prioritize a shared Islamic identity over ethnic Pashtun nationalism (M. C. Miller, 2021).

Finally, the insurgency succeeds by not losing, particularly when confronting a powerful foreign state. In essence, their strategy is to outlast the external force. This has been the Taliban's basic strategy (Farrell, 2018). The United

States, despite recognizing Pakistan's duplicity, failed to confront this challenge effectively.

Premature Withdrawal Planning: The Doha Agreement and State Collapse

The final phase of the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan was marked by a premature and poorly planned withdrawal. Despite differences in approach, both Donald Trump and Joe Biden reached the same core conclusion: that remaining in Afghanistan no longer served American interests (Murtazashvili, 2022)

The withdrawal process began under President Trump with direct negotiations between the United States and the Taliban in 2019-2020, conducted without the participation of the Afghan government. This move granted a long-standing Taliban demand; they were willing to negotiate with the U.S. but refused to engage alongside what they considered an illegitimate puppet government. This move undermined the legitimacy of the Afghan government and its security forces (Crocker, 2021). These negotiations culminated in the February 2020 Doha agreement, under which the Taliban committed to preventing al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations operating from Afghanistan in exchange for the full withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces (Murtazashvili, 2022).

However, the agreement contained several structural weaknesses. A fundamental weakness of the agreement was the absence of an effective enforcement mechanism. The Taliban's counter terrorism commitments were ambiguously defined and largely unverifiable in practice. Although the group refrained from attacking U.S. forces after the deal, resulting in no American combat fatalities during that period, it simultaneously escalated its operations against the Afghan National Defense and Security forces (ANDSF). Incidents of attack surged significantly, rising from about 6,700 in the three months before the agreement to more than 13,000 in the

following quarter (Al Jazeera, 2021). This selective adherence allowed the Taliban to sustain and even strengthen its momentum, while the U.S. continued its troop withdrawal regardless of changing circumstances on the ground.

The agreement further weakened the Afghan government. As part of the deal, the U.S. demanded the Afghan government to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, a move that violated Afghan law and reinforced perceptions of the government's subordination to external actors (Snyder, 2023). Legal analyses have described the Doha agreement as "a peculiar deal without historical precedent," noting that the U.S. had never before negotiated with an insurgent group while excluding a close government ally (Poya, 2025). By engaging directly with the Taliban while excluding the Afghan government, the U.S. "undermined any hope of resolving the conflict in a way that would protect the right of the population" and "weakened the legitimacy of the agreement" (Poya, 2025).

At the same time, the Afghan security forces depended heavily on the U.S. support, including weapons, air power, logistics, intelligence, and financial assistance. So, when the U.S. decided to leave, Afghan forces felt it was pointless to keep fighting the Taliban. According to David Petraeus, the Afghan military had become so dependent on U.S. technology that once that support disappeared, it quickly collapsed (Snyder, 2023). This issue was not merely a technical weakness but a deeper erosion of morale.

In April 2021, then-President Biden announced that U.S. troops would withdraw from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021. This decision marked the conclusion of a gradual drawdown that had begun under the earlier administration (Murtazashvili, 2022). However, this decision was not accompanied by a credible contingency plan. Crucially, there was no clear "Plan B" if the Afghan government failed. Earlier studies had already said

that the U.S. had not set up any conditions or guarantees in case the Taliban broke the deal or continued fighting. One report notes that the U.S. “did not set any conditions, if the peace process failed” (Cordesman, 2020). This allowed withdrawal to continue despite the Taliban’s increasing strength.

The consequences were immediate and dramatic. The Afghan government fell apart before the 31 August withdrawal deadline. The swiftness of the Taliban takeover shocked both U.S. authorities and their allies (CFR, 2026). The collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) was not primarily due to technical shortcoming rather many soldiers felt they no longer had a cause worth fighting for (Murtazashvili, 2022).

Ultimately, the Afghan state had been built on external support that could not be sustained independently. When that support was withdrawn, the system collapsed. The United States was intended to leave a stable and self-sufficient state, but its approach, marked by overambitious goals, insufficient local ownership, and disregard for Afghan realities, failed to achieve that objective.

Conclusion

The United States intervention in Afghanistan ultimately failed not because America lacked military power, financial resources, or good intentions, but because U.S. policy was undermined by deep structural problems embedded in both strategy and execution. Instead of consolidating initial success, the U.S. diverted essential resources to Iraq, enabling the Taliban to rebuild and regain strength. Over time, the operation evolved from its initial counterterrorism goals into an expensive, incoherent state-building project. Efforts to impose a centralized Western-style government disregarded Afghanistan’s decentralized social and political framework, thereby undermining local legitimacy. At the same time, large volumes of aid flowed

with limited oversight, fueling systemic corruption that eroded public trust in state institutions.

The lack of promotion of genuine Afghan ownership was equally important. U.S. policymakers often viewed Afghan traditions and informal institutions not as potential assets for stability and legitimacy but as barriers to modernization. This cultural disconnect helped produce a state that depended heavily on foreign support and was disconnected from its own people. Once that support was withdrawn, the entire system disintegrated.

The Taliban's resilience and eventual victory were significantly aided by external safe havens and support, especially from Pakistan. Despite twenty years of conflict and multiple warnings, Washington failed to develop an effective strategy to eliminate these safe havens. Meanwhile, the Taliban demonstrated notable organizational adaptability, evolving from a defeated regime into a sophisticated insurgent force capable of providing shadow governance, justice, and basic services in regions overlooked by the Kabul government.

The final phase of failure came with the poorly managed withdrawal. The 2020 Doha agreement was negotiated directly with the Taliban while sidelining the Afghan government, further undermining the latter's legitimacy. The U.S. proceeds with the withdrawal even as the Taliban gained strength and the Afghan security forces, who depended on U.S. support, rapidly lost the will to fight. The rapid collapse of the government revealed how hollow much of the state's progress had been.

The case of Afghanistan underscores a broader lesson: military strength and financial resources cannot replace political legitimacy, cultural understanding, and locally rooted governance. Lasting state-building requires clear, achievable objectives, respect for local context, and the

population's involvement in determining their political future. The U.S. intervention failed because it disregarded these essential principles.

Chapter 5

Lessons to be learned

The United States twenty-year engagement in Afghanistan, from the post 9/11 invasion in 2001 to the chaotic withdrawal in August 2021, culminated in the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's return to power. As detailed in chapter 4, this outcome was not the result of one mistake, but by the combination of several interconnected policy failures: the diversion of resources to Iraq, shifting and expanding objectives that led to mission creep, the imposition of centralized system of governance model that was ill-suited to Afghan realities, systemic corruption, neglect of Afghan ownership and traditional structures, the Taliban's resilience and role of Pakistan, and withdrawal process under the Doha agreement that undermined the Afghan government.

These interconnected failures culminated in the rapid collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021, despite the expenditure of over \$2.3 trillion, the loss of 2,455 U.S. lives, and huge suffering in Afghanistan (Crawford, 2021).

This chapter summarizes these findings to address the central research question: Why did U.S. policy in Afghanistan fail, leading to the collapse of the Afghan government? It argues that this failure stemmed from a deep mismatch between the U.S.'s ambitious goals and Afghanistan's realities. This approach failed to adequately account for Afghanistan's societal, cultural, and political realities, producing a state that was neither legitimate nor sustainable.

Misalignment between U.S. ambitions and Afghan realities

Strategic misalignment: The United States broadened its goals from a limited, achievable counterterrorism mission to an expensive and ultimately unrealistic state-building project. As the Afghanistan papers revealed, U.S. policymakers were “stranded without a strategy” (Whitlock, 2019b). These objectives were not merely ambitious but contradictory, as the report notes, we are trying to achieve the unachievable instead of achieving the achievable (Whitlock, 2019b). This mission creep was compounded by the diversion of resources to Iraq, leaving the Afghan state under-resourced during its most vulnerable post-invasion phase.

Political misalignment: The centralized governance framework introduced by the Bonn Conference and enshrined in the 2004 Constitution fundamentally contradicted Afghanistan’s historical preference for decentralized, tribal, and local governance. Political legitimacy in Afghanistan has traditionally been rooted in local institutions such as communities, jirgas, and shuras rather than in a centralized authority based in Kabul (Barfield, 2022). The concentration of power in the capital marginalized the existing polycentric structure and undermined internal legitimacy, leaving the government appearing disconnected from the 75 percent of Afghans living in rural areas and weakening the state’s legitimacy from the very beginning (Zyla, 2025).

Cultural misalignment: U.S. policymakers repeatedly failed to understand or respect Afghan social structure, customary law, and traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms. The \$900 million invested in establishing a new formal system proved largely ineffective because an estimated 80 to 90 percent of Afghans rely on traditional, community-based mechanisms (SIGAR, 2021). As Hamid observed, “Americans never understood Afghanistan as the Taliban did,” often treating local traditions as barriers to

modernity rather than as potential sources of stability and legitimacy (Hamid, 2021). This cultural disconnect alienated much of the population and created a vacuum that the Taliban's "rough-and-ready" justice system readily stepped in to fill (Hamid, 2021).

Temporal misalignment: U.S. policy was shaped by a fundamental mismatch in time horizons. Driven by domestic political pressure, the U.S. government operated on a cycle of short-term results and an eventual exit strategy. In contrast, the Taliban pursued a long-term strategy based on endurance, attrition, and patience (Farrell, 2018). Their goal was to outlast foreign forces. The Doha agreement and ensuing withdrawal exposed this imbalance. The Afghan state, built with external assistance, disintegrated quickly once that support was withdrawn (Murtazashvili, 2022).

Lessons to be learned from the conflict:

Clear, consistent, and achievable objectives are essential

The lack of clear, consistent objectives was one of the most fundamental and enduring flaws in U.S. policy toward Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021. Throughout two decades, the mission's objectives fluctuated repeatedly, transitioning from counterterrorism to counterinsurgency, from state-building to exit strategy, resulting in confusion and strategic disarray (Herd, 2021).

Critically, these objectives were not merely ambitious but contradictory, as the report notes, "we are trying to achieve the unachievable instead of achieving the achievable" (Whitlock, 2019b). SIGAR noted in its final report that the U.S. was simply not equipped to take on something this ambitious in such a difficult and unforgiving environment, no matter how big the budget is. When the U.S. finally began its withdrawal, it became clear how

weak and dependent the Afghan government was (SIGAR, 2021). The Afghan case offers an important lesson for policymakers to resist mission creep, the expansion of goals beyond initial intentions, and to maintain a disciplined focus on limited, attainable outcomes aligned with available resources and local conditions.

Deep understanding of the local context is indispensable

Interventions are unlikely to succeed when interveners lack a deep understanding of the populations they aim to assist (von Billerbeck et al., 2024). Local knowledge is therefore crucial to the effectiveness of interventions because it enables actors to accurately identify and interpret local challenges and to formulate appropriate responses (Zyla, 2025). It also helps prevent unintended negative consequences, including harm to local communities and risks to the overall missions. In this context, local knowledge includes familiarity with local actors, historical developments, cultural norms, political economies, and broader social, economic, political, and military dynamics (Zyla, 2025). The intervention in Afghanistan shows that peacebuilders often operate without sufficient grounding in local realities (Zyla, 2025).

As Shadi Hamid observes, “Americans never understood Afghanistan as the Taliban did.” Rather than viewing local traditions as potential sources of legitimacy, U.S. authorities saw them as an impediment to modernity (Hamid, 2021). The intervention in Afghanistan shows that operating without this knowledge can result in catastrophic failure.

Do not impose a centralized model on a decentralized, tribal society

Afghanistan has long been marked by weak central authority, counterbalanced by strong local and tribal networks. The 2001 Bonn Agreement and the 2004 Constitution created a centralized system (Barfield, 2022). This approach neglected the country's “polycentric political system,”

in which legitimacy traditionally flowed from local tribal councils, village leaders (maliks), community councils (shuras, jirgas), and religious leaders (mullahs) rather than from Kabul (Murtazashvili, 2014).

Policymakers demonstrated limited understanding of Afghanistan's polycentric political system and prioritized strengthening the central government's authority and capacity. This approach undermined efforts to establish a sustainable and indigenous Afghan social contract (Zyla, 2025). It also weakened internal legitimacy by eroding local ownership and leaving Afghan officials with limited endogenous authority. As a result, the government was often perceived as lacking legitimacy, especially among the 75 percent of Afghans living in rural areas who saw little benefit from a distant, urban-centered government. Moreover, the exclusion of the Taliban from the 2001 Bonn conference meant that no genuine peace agreement was achieved, only a victor's settlement (Zyla, 2025). That ultimately laid the groundwork for future conflict. The Afghan experience highlights a critical lesson: imposing a centralized governance model on decentralized societies is unlikely to produce legitimacy or stability. Future policymakers must work with existing traditional and local governance structures rather than attempting to build entirely new institutions from scratch.

Security and governance must be pursued together

In Afghanistan, they made a big mistake. They prioritized security over governance, believing that development would automatically follow once the country was safe, but that did not happen (Zyla, 2025). As William argues, security and governance should not compete for attention and resources. They should not be done in sequences like security first, governance later. They have a symbiotic relationship, they need each other. Long-term security can only be achieved when good governance is in place

and has been consolidated so that people see it as legitimate (Williams, 2022).

The consequences of prioritizing security over governance were severe. The U.S. counterinsurgency operation achieved some short-term successes, but they largely obscured deeper structural problems, including a corrupt and ineffective Afghan state that U.S. policies had, in part, helped shape. Over time, these underlying weaknesses resurfaced and undermined the stability of the entire system (Williams, 2022). In many areas, the population perceived the Afghan government as ineffective, while the Taliban were able to exploit governance gaps by offering an alternative form of dispute resolution.

The social contract is the foundation of sustainable peace

The social contract is an unwritten agreement in which people give up some freedom to accept government authority. In return, governments provide security and services. The social contract depends on three key elements: state capacity, legitimacy, and effectiveness (Zyla, 2025). Capacity refers to the state's ability to provide basic services, including security, law enforcement, and economic management. Effectiveness means delivering these services efficiently and reliably to the population, ideally with minimal dependence on foreign aid. Legitimacy depends on whether citizens view the state's actions as fair and acceptable, and, as a result, are willing to accept its authority (Zyla, 2025).

In Afghanistan, the government lacked all three. Warlords and criminal networks filled the gaps left by the state, offering security and economic opportunity (Zyla, 2025). At the same time, a weak, centralized government failed to provide services effectively and fairly. Combined with widespread corruption, this weakness undermined service delivery and public trust (Zyla, 2025). The externally imposed, aid-dependent state never developed

genuine endogenous authority. Many viewed it as externally imposed rather than locally rooted, limiting their willingness to support or defend it. Sustainable peace requires not only institutional capacity and effective governance but also legitimacy.

Massive, poorly overseen aid fuels systemic corruption

A massive flow of over \$140 billion in aid, with limited oversight, ultimately fostered widespread corruption, and perhaps most importantly, systemic corruption proved deeply destructive to the Afghan state and its institutions (Williams, 2022). Allowing such corruption to flourish during an active insurgency critically undermined the regime's survival. While patron-client relationships and informal practices had long been embedded in Afghan society, the post-2001 intervention transformed them into a vast, increasingly entrenched system of large-scale corruption (UNODC, 2010, p. 4). As scholars have noted, this pervasive corruption eroded the dignity of ordinary Afghans and severely weakened public trust in the government. In turn, this loss of legitimacy deprived the state of popular support, leaving it highly vulnerable to the Taliban's resurgence. Ultimately, these dynamics stand out as one of the most important lessons from two decades of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan (Williams, 2022). Financial assistance alone cannot build effective institutions, and if poorly managed, it can do more harm than good.

The U.S. model of security assistance requires fundamental reforms

The U.S. spent \$83 billion to build and support the Afghan security forces (Rose, 2021), yet the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces were inadequately prepared for the U.S. withdrawal. They were heavily reliant on the United States. The U.S. knew about the shortcomings in logistics and maintenance, as well as heavy dependence on air support, years

before the withdrawal. Despite this awareness, U.S. policymakers failed to adequately address these vulnerabilities (Schroden, 2021).

The U.S. model of security assistance requires significant reforms. Experience in Afghanistan demonstrates that large-scale efforts to build a foreign military have ended in failure. While part of these problems stems from the absence of dedicated institutional capacity within the U.S. government to effectively manage such initiatives, a more fundamental issue lies in the design of the assistance model itself. U.S. efforts have tended to prioritize tactical training, equipment provision, and the replication of American military structures (Schroden, 2021). In contrast, insufficient attention has been given to crucial non-material factors, including leadership, maintenance, logistics, and institutional oversight, as well as the partner state's specific economic, social, and human resource conditions (Schroden, 2021). In Afghanistan, rather than producing a self-sufficient and effective military, the U.S. created forces heavily dependent on U.S. support for both operational capability and long-term sustainability (Schroden, 2021). Future security assistance must prioritize non-material factors such as maintenance, leadership, and logistics, and focus on building self-sufficiency rather than dependency.

Understanding of neighbors cannot be ignored

The U.S. also failed to adequately understand and address the conflict's regional dimension, particularly the role of neighboring Pakistan. Pakistan's ISI played a significant role by providing the Taliban with training, funding, medical support, and safe passage from 2001 onward. The Quetta Shura functioned with relative freedom under the watch of ISI (Waldman, 2010). A NATO study published in 2012, based on over 27,000 interrogations of approximately 4,000 captured Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other

fighters, found that ISI assistance was essential for the Taliban's survival and resurgence after 2001 (Riedel, 2013).

Without Pakistan, the Taliban would likely not have been able to recover. Despite growing awareness of this relationship, the U.S. failed to develop an effective strategy to close these sanctuaries. The U.S. response remained limited and inconsistent, allowing the Taliban to operate with strategic depth beyond the reach of U.S. and Afghan forces before re-entering Afghanistan.

Condition-based withdrawals are critical

The Doha agreement committed the U.S. to a full withdrawal by May 2021, later extended to September 2021. By negotiating directly with the Taliban while excluding the Afghan government, the U.S. fatally undermined the regime's legitimacy before withdrawal began (Crocker, 2021). This sidelining convinced many Afghans that the government had already been abandoned.

A further weakness of the agreement was the absence of an effective enforcement mechanism. The Taliban's counterterrorism commitments were ambiguously defined and largely unverifiable in practice. While the group refrained from attacking U.S. forces after the deal, resulting in no American combat fatalities during that period, it simultaneously escalated its operations against the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Despite clear evidence that conditions were deteriorating, the United States continued to withdraw forces from Afghanistan. This time-driven approach and the absence of condition-based withdrawal further weakened the Afghan government and undermined the morale of its security forces. Future withdrawal strategies should instead be tied to clearly verifiable progress and supported by credible contingency plans in case conditions deteriorate.

Humanitarian consequences should be anticipated

The humanitarian consequences of the U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban's consolidation of power have been severe and long-lasting, transforming Afghanistan into one of the world's most complex and persistent crises. According to the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan, in 2026, approximately 21.9 million people, about 45 percent of Afghanistan's population, require humanitarian assistance. Food insecurity remains severe, affecting 17.4 million people in emergency conditions, driven by recurring drought (OCHA, 2025).

Malnutrition has reached alarming levels, particularly among women and children (IPS, 2024). The Taliban has imposed restrictions on women's employment and movement, severely hampering humanitarian aid delivery. Prohibitions on women working with NGOs, restrictions on girls' secondary and university education, and limitations on unaccompanied travel have intensified vulnerabilities, contributing to rising rates of child marriage, increased maternal health risks, and long-term development consequences (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The healthcare system, already under strain, has been further weakened by restrictions on aid and a shortage of female medical personnel resulting from educational constraints (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

These conditions reflect not only the immediate effects of regime change but also the structural fragility of U.S.-supported institutions. The rapid collapse revealed a profound dependency; despite two decades of investment and billions in assistance, the Afghan state could not sustain basic services without external support.

Concluding Remarks

The United States engagement in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 stands as one of the longest and most expensive military missions in modern history. It began in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack, when the U.S. decided to remove the Taliban from power, destroy al-Qaeda, and prevent Afghanistan from continuing to function as a base for transnational terrorism. This thesis set out to answer a central research question: Why did U.S. policy in Afghanistan fail, leading to the collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's return to power in 2021?

The core answer, developed throughout the previous chapters, is that the failure stemmed not from a single mistake but from a persistent misalignment between the United States's ambitions and the complex political, cultural, and social dynamics of Afghanistan. What began as a limited counterterrorism mission quickly evolved into a broad nation-building effort. In the process, the U.S. imposed a highly centralized system of governance that conflicted with Afghanistan's historically decentralized and tribal political order, contributed to systemic corruption through inadequately monitored aid flows, fostered dependency rather than sustainable local capacity, and ultimately withdrew without ensuring stability. Pakistan's continued support for the Taliban further undermined U.S. efforts. The collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021 was therefore not sudden, but the predictable outcome of these long-term structural weaknesses.

The roots of failure also predate 2001. U.S. support for the mujahideen channeled through Pakistan's ISI during the Soviet-Afghan war contributed to the militarization of Afghan society and the rise of extremist networks.

After the Soviet withdrawal, U.S. disengagement created a power vacuum that enabled the Taliban's emergence. These earlier decisions shaped the conditions faced after 9/11.

Across four administrations, U.S. strategy shifted from counterterrorism to nation-building and counterinsurgency, and ultimately to withdrawal. Yet the same underlying weakness persisted: unclear and evolving objectives, inconsistent strategy, and insufficient understanding of local realities. Major policy failures included diverting attention and resources to Iraq after 2003, establishing a centralized state incompatible with Afghan traditions, widespread corruption fueled by unchecked aid, disregard for traditional governance structures such as jirgas and shuras, and an inability to counter Pakistan's role as a sanctuary. The 2020 Doha agreement, negotiated directly with the Taliban without the Afghan government, further eroded the government's legitimacy.

These interconnected failures produced a fragile and aid-dependent state that lacked genuine popular legitimacy. Afghan institutions, including the security forces, remained heavily reliant on U.S. financial, military, and logistic support. Once that support was withdrawn, the system collapsed rapidly.

This thesis contributes to the broader debate on foreign intervention and state-building by demonstrating that success in such a context depends less on military capability or financial investment than on strategic coherence, cultural understanding, and genuine local ownership. It also highlights a recurring pattern in U.S. foreign policy: prioritizing short-term tactical gains over long-term political sustainability. Notably, both U.S. support for the mujahideen in the 1980s and the post-2001 intervention ultimately led to the same outcome: the resurgence of the Taliban.

The significance of this case goes beyond Afghanistan. The U.S. experience highlights the inherent limitations of externally imposed state-building in fragmented, non-Western societies, the danger of mission creep, the significant impact of regional sanctuary dynamics, and the vulnerability of institutions that rely primarily on foreign aid rather than domestic legitimacy.

In the end, the failure of U.S. policy in Afghanistan was not a failure of effort or resources, but of understanding, strategy, and institutional design. Despite genuine commitments from individuals on the ground, the U.S. attempted to transform Afghanistan faster and more extensively than its society could absorb. A U.S. diplomat, Michael Metrinko, stated that Afghanistan had gone from medieval times to modern times in just a few years. That was too much too soon. The result was a dependent and corrupt state that could not survive without external support.

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