

Afghanization and the Prompt Collapse of the Nation

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August 2021 witnessed a turning point in US operations abroad in a notable example of the withdrawal from Afghanistan. After decades and enormous amount of money spent on the Afghanistan mission, Kabul did not manage to sustain itself. Even before the US troops withdrawal date, the country fell into the hands of Taliban.

In this article, we are going to examine the causes that led to such an outcome. Failure is characterized by two factors. The first is the failure of the mission on the military front. US government was being present and active in Afghanistan shortly after the 9/11 attacks, when Taliban refused to hand in the al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden. However, these 20 years of presence meant little when Taliban captured Kabul even before the US troops last withdrawal date approached. In this section, we will also give a considerable space to the role of contractors in the mission. After 2014, they were playing the biggest role in sustaining the country's security.

The second aspect is related to finances. Around USD 2 trillion of the US taxpayers' money was spent on the Afghanistan mission. However, the dire situation in which Afghanistan found itself during the US withdrawal raises eyebrow concerning the use of these finances. Not only were government and military echelons incapable of self-defense but also, according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 97 percent of the Afghan population is teetering on descending below the poverty line by mid 2022.¹

Afghanistan Mission's Dire End

The United States, its allies, and partners spent 20 years in Afghanistan building democracy and governance. Yet, after two decades of costly training, the Afghan government and military were incapable of defending their country, falling to the Taliban in just 11 short days—due in part to an overreliance on contractors. While the official figures state that 2,442 US troops died in Afghanistan since 2001, the estimated 3,800 US private security contractors who died during the same period far exceeds that number. The Pentagon does not publicly track contractor deaths; so, the stated figure is perhaps only an estimate.

NATO's combat mission formerly ended in Afghanistan at the end of 2014, but a 13,000-strong force remained in country to train the Afghan military and

assist in counterterrorism operations. There were casualties, but policy makers considered the numbers to be manageable. Much is made of the fact that there had been no US casualties for quite some time prior to the fall of Kabul. Yet, as illustrated by the bombing at the Kabul airport on 26 August that killed 13 American soldiers and a score of Afghan civilians, this period of tranquility was in fact a mirage.

Contractors were the backbone of the Afghanistan mission after 2014. The United States, its NATO allies and partners, as well as Afghan forces heavily relied on these contractors. Contractors were always a central feature of the war, but after 2014 their prevalence increased. This was a unique period in the war that was post-surge and indeed post-nation building, as the United States tried to find ways to meet its primary objective—defeating terrorists without spending US lives. This involved, to paraphrase the language of the Vietnam era, an “Afghanization” of the conflict.

In that reality, training of the Afghan military relied on a significant number of private contractors. According to the US Congressional Research Service, as of the second quarter of 2020 alone, 22,562 contractors (7,856 US nationals and 14,706 foreign and host-country nationals) were deployed in Afghanistan.² Indeed, the Afghan military relied on these contractors practically for all military operations, including training, gear maintenance, intelligence gathering, and air support.

Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Afghanistan David Sedney, in an interview with *Foreign Policy*, stated, “We built the Afghan army in our image to be an army that operates with air support and intelligence [and] whose backbone is contractors.”³ And, Sean Carberry, serving in the US Department of Defense’s Inspector General Office until March 2021, said in August, “Contractors were essential for keeping most of the air platforms flying . . . The Afghan army could still conduct operations without contractors—they could fight, maneuver, shoot, all the basics. But, without the safety net of ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] and air support, many Afghan soldiers didn’t want to go head-to-head with the Taliban.”⁴ Air support was a paramount factor in keeping Afghanistan free from Taliban control. The loss of air support played a significant role in the defeat of the Afghan military as air superiority was an important morale booster for Afghan soldiers in the field and provided logistical support to remote regions. Yet, there were Afghan soldiers and units, such as the special forces, which fought exceptionally well.

In other words, contractors employed by the United States saw little need to involve the Afghan government even nominally—a situation which has, one must admit, odd echoes of the colonial administration of European empires in Asia. Instead of actually building accountable governance and institutions in Afghani-

stan, the United States preferred shortcuts and spending on contractors—efforts that had they been applied to contracts in NATO countries would have likely been illegal. US experts found that consulting Afghan government officials and project beneficiaries during project design and implementation slowed things down; so, US agencies and their contractors “often did not bother,” according to the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report.⁵

On reflection, it appears it was not the development of the Afghan military through the years of training that was keeping the Taliban away but the presence of foreign troops and contractors. The abrupt departure of this support concluded with the fall of the Afghan government. Though a few brave souls have apparently reconstituted something akin to the Northern Alliance in the Tajik-majority regions of the country, the war is perhaps over. The failure in Afghanistan will be taught in military institutions around the globe for decades. The overreliance on contractors and the failure to generate buy-in from the Afghans should be two key lessons.

Misuse of the Finances

The swift collapse of the Afghan government contrasts with the stated goal of the United States and NATO in Afghanistan to build a stable and sustainable democracy. While this was the lofty rhetoric, the United States, according to its proclamation, gradually de-emphasized nation building. Yet the dollars and cents told a different story entirely. Four American administrations—two Republican and two Democratic—spent more than USD 1 trillion in Afghanistan. A handful in the government tried to keep track of those expenditures. According to a new study by Brown University, the US costs for the war in Afghanistan amounted to USD 2.313 trillion.⁶

Few institutions, let alone individuals, have looked closely at those numbers. One entity that did was the SIGAR. Founded in 2008, this organization was designed to serve as an Afghan War spending watchdog. However, it appears few in government heeded SIGAR’s dire reports released in recent years. Reviewing “twenty years and \$145 billion of reconstruction funds,” the organization’s final report did not mince words: “If the goal was to . . . leave behind a country that can sustain itself . . . the overall picture is bleak.”⁷

Afghanistan’s then-president, Ashraf Ghani, came to similar conclusions, infamously abandoning Kabul by helicopter on 15 August. According to the Russian embassy in Kabul, Ghani left with a helicopter and four cars full of money. As the source for this story is the Russian embassy’s spokesperson in Kabul, Nikita Ishchenko, told Reuters, “As for the collapse of the (outgoing) regime, it is most eloquently characterized by the way Ghani fled Afghanistan. . . . Four cars were full

of y, they tried to stuff another part of the money into a helicopter, but not all of it fit. And some of the money was left lying on the tarmac.”⁸

In a true democracy, the system and the bureaucracy are accountable to the people. It is, after all, their tax monies on which the government operates. However, in Afghanistan during the war, the payroll for the military and its bureaucrats came from the US taxpayers, with a good portion unaccounted for. The US policy focused not on building a Jeffersonian democracy north of the Khyber Pass but rather on quick turnaround solutions related more to spending the funds in their contracts. This helped contribute to the Afghanistan state becoming a rentier economy, relying on the largesse of the American taxpayer. The final SIGAR report spoke plainly in exposing the lack of accountability: “The U.S. government was focused on short-term gains” and “rather than revisit their assumptions when progress proved elusive, U.S. officials concluded that it would be better to power through the shortcut by adding even more money.”⁹ ❖

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Notes

1. 97 “Percent of Afghans Could Plunge into Poverty by Mid 2022, says UNDP,” *UNDP*, 9 September 2021, <https://www.undp.org/>.

2. Heidi M. Peters, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007–2020* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 22 February 2021), 8, <https://sgp.fas.org/>.

3. Jack Detsch, “Departure of Foreign Contractors Was a Turning Point in Afghan Military’s Collapse,” *Foreign Policy*, 16 August 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

4. Detsch, “Departure of Foreign Contractors Was a Turning Point in Afghan Military’s Collapse.”

5. *What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction* (Washington, DC: Special Investigator for Afghan Reconstruction, August 2021), 32, <https://www.sigar.mil/>.

6. Watson Institute International and Public Affairs, Brown University, *U.S. Costs to Date for the War in Afghanistan, in \$ Billions FY2001–FY2022*, <https://watson.brown.edu/>.

7. *What We Need to Learn*, SIGAR, 27.

8. “Гани Бежал из Кабула, Набив Деньгами Вертолет, Заявило Посольства России,” *RIA News*, 16 August 2021, <https://ria.ru/>; and “Russia Says Afghan President Fled with Cars and helicopter Full of Cash – RIA.” *Reuters*, 16 August 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/>.
9. *What We Need to Learn*, SIGAR, 27.

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