



Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

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Afghanistan 2001–21

Executive Summary

The Soviet occupation from 1979 to 1989 and six years of internal conflict between competing resistance groups after the Soviet departure left Afghanistan devastated. A Pakistani-backed group known as the Taliban ended the lawlessness and chaos of the post-Soviet period and consolidated its control over most of the country by 1996.¹ The Taliban's sheltering of the transnational terrorist group al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda's attacks on US soil on September 11, 2001, led to US intervention in October 2001. After the US invasion, much of the Taliban rank-and-file and all its senior leadership regrouped in Pakistan. The Taliban insurgency against the American-backed Karzai government in Afghanistan began in 2004 after the George W. Bush administration dismissed the Taliban surrender offer.

The legacy of the Soviet-Afghan war and the Taliban era left deep scars on Afghan society and increased Afghanistan's traditional xenophobia toward foreign forces. The Taliban was almost entirely a Pashtun tribal movement, and the Pashtuns' territorial position astride Afghanistan's southern border with Pakistan enabled it to use Pakistan's vast and remote northern tribal areas as a cross-border sanctuary in which to train, equip, recruit, and regroup. Protected by kinship networks and reinforced by a tribal culture that emphasized loyalty, revenge, and animosity toward outsiders, the insurgency posed an intractable problem for the US counterinsurgency effort.

Beyond having an ideal cultural and geographical operating environment and covert backing from Pakistan's intelligence service (ISI), the Taliban also had a powerful organizing narrative, virtually unlimited recruits among the Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan, and huge Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. A deeply flawed US counterinsurgency approach created severe repercussions that also contributed significantly to the mission's failure. The United States and its allies in Afghanistan committed too few manpower resources to maintain a security presence in a country four times the size of South Vietnam, and the counterinsurgents lacked a coherent strategy and realistic end state. Moreover, the nation-building objective went beyond what was achievable, causing the United States to fail, beyond the initial success of removing al-Qaeda from Afghanistan.

Lastly, there was a mismatch between US expectations of what the Afghan government would undertake to address the core grievances fueling the insurgency and the reality that the Afghan elite benefited from the status quo and lacked the incentives for real change. Despite substantial US investment, it could not build a legitimate, self-sustaining Afghan security force and governance system. The overreliance on kinetic operations rather than a focus on developing an inclusive political settlement further undermined efforts to win "hearts and minds." This faulty strategy eroded American and European public support and allied confidence, making it difficult to meet the commitments necessary for successful counterinsurgency. The failure to resolve these fundamental issues contributed to the collapse of the US-backed Afghan government when US troops withdrew in 2021, ushering the Taliban regime back into power and undoing two decades of nation-building efforts.

Assessing the Five Factors

1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

No. Afghanistan has always lacked a strong sense of national identity. At the beginning of the American-led conflict, Afghan society was deeply fragmented by ethnic, tribal, and regional divisions exacerbated by decades of internal conflict and the Soviet invasion. Personal loyalties usually lay with tribal affiliations rather than the state.

2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

No. The Afghan government installed in the aftermath of the 2001 US invasion was not viewed as legitimate by most of the Afghan population. First, the Karzai administration—and, later, the Ghani regime—was characterized by pervasive corruption, incompetence, and failure to carry out basic functions. Government authority was restricted to a few urban centers and had limited outreach to the rural areas where 75 to 80 percent of the country's population lived and the Taliban exercised almost uncontested control. At the start of the conflict in 2001, approximately 77.83 percent of the population lived in rural areas, while about 22.17 percent resided in urban areas.

3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country's overall population?

No. The successive Afghan governments, despite US and NATO assistance and support, never achieved 85 percent security control over the population. The Taliban contested vast areas and maintained a strong presence in rural areas, gradually regaining ground, especially after US and NATO forces shifted to a support role in 2014. By 2021, the Taliban effectively controlled or contested most of the country and the population, leading to the regime collapse.

4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?

Yes. The Taliban insurgents enjoyed unlimited and uncontested sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan, particularly in the tribal areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. American and Pakistani interests were not strategically aligned, as Pakistan always saw the Northern Alliance as a hostile group and a proxy of India. The sanctuary in Pakistan provided the insurgents with a haven for recruitment, training, and logistics, enabling them to sustain their insurgency. The United States used drone strikes in the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas to decapitate Taliban leadership, but the effort did little to disrupt Taliban operations.

5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?

No. Afghanistan did not have an army at the start of the conflict in 2001. The Afghan National Army (ANA) was built with US and NATO assistance, training, and funding. The ANA faced numerous challenges, however, including corruption, a lack of internal social cohesion, poor morale, massive desertion, and a lack of logistical capabilities and was unable to withstand the Taliban offensive in 2021 without foreign support. The ethnic composition of the Afghan National Army was imbalanced, with northern minorities dominating the enlisted and officer ranks. This imbalance posed operational challenges in the Pashtun-dominated areas, especially in southern Afghanistan, which viewed the northern-dominated ANA members as outsiders.

Outcome

The five factors counterinsurgency model accurately predicts the outcome of the conflict. The US counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan faced hurdles from the outset; prominent among those were the legitimacy dilemmas confronted by the Karzai and Ghani regimes, persistent guerilla external sanctuary, the inability to establish security control over 85 percent of the population, and the absence of a competent national army. These factors, combined with strategic errors and a prolonged military presence, led to the failure of the US nation building effort and the return of the Taliban.

AFGHANISTAN 2001-21	
NATIONAL IDENTITY	NO
GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY	NO
POPULATION SECURITY	NO
EXTERNAL SANCTUARY	YES
EXISTING SECURITY FORCES	NO

Endnotes

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