

# We All Lost Afghanistan

## Two Decades of Mistakes, Misjudgments, and Collective Failure

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Watching U.S. airstrikes against the Taliban in the Tora Bora mountains, Afghanistan, December 2001  
*Erik de Castro / Reuters*

As Afghanistan tumbles into Taliban hands, the avalanche of recrimination and outright condemnation of the Biden administration’s withdrawal of U.S. troops in Afghanistan has become unrelenting. Former National Security Adviser General H. R. McMaster echoed the sentiments of many when he declared that Afghanistan is a “humanity problem on a modern-day frontier between barbarism and civilization” and that the United States lacks the will “to continue the effort in the interest of all humanity.”

What is happening is a terrible tragedy, but the blame cannot be laid at any one door. The Biden administration’s short timetable for withdrawal, tied to the 20th anniversary of 9/11, and in the middle of the fighting season, was a mistake. But the situation on the ground is the result of two decades of miscalculations and failed policies pursued by three prior U.S. administrations and of the failure of Afghanistan’s leaders to govern for [the good](#) of their people. Many of the critics speaking out now were architects of those policies.

The broader questions about why Afghanistan finds itself at this juncture undermine attempts to justify the “war on terror” as it was waged in the country over two decades. During my more than three years in Kabul, between 2013 and 2016 (including as U.S. ambassador from 2014 to 2016), it became evident to me just how steep the challenges to U.S. strategy were. Although we were largely successful in eliminating al Qaeda in the country and reducing the threat of terrorist attacks in the United States, we [failed](#) in our approach to counterinsurgency, to Afghan politics, and to “nation building.” We underestimated the resiliency of the Taliban. And we misread the geopolitical realities of the region.

It is time to face the facts: a decision to delay the withdrawal of U.S. forces for another year or two would ultimately have made no difference to the unbearably sad consequences on the ground in Afghanistan. The United States would have had to commit to Afghanistan indefinitely, at a cost of tens of billions a year, with little hope of building on fragile gains inside a country with weak governance, with battlefield conditions eroding, and with the certainty that many more American lives would be lost as the Taliban again targeted U.S. forces and diplomats.

As the blame games and lessons-learned exercises begin, therefore, it is also time for critics of the withdrawal to address squarely the misjudgments and shortcomings of the Afghanistan intervention that led us to this point—and for them to recognize that responsibility for what went wrong should be widely shared.

## **THE MILITARY COLLAPSE**

In light of the Taliban’s rapid takeover of Afghan city after Afghan city in recent days, perhaps the most striking American misjudgment is our ongoing overestimation of the capabilities of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. Even without tactical American military support, the ANDSF should have been in a position to defend major cities and critical military installations. As numerous observers have pointed out, the ANDSF on paper was significantly larger and far better equipped and organized than the Taliban. The Afghan Special Forces were compared with [the best](#) in the region. As late as March 2021, U.S. intelligence briefings for Biden administration officials were reportedly warning that the Taliban could take over most of the country in two to three years—not in a few weeks.

This overestimation of ANDSF capabilities was a constant after the end of the “surge” of American forces between 2009 and 2011. The semiannual U.S. Defense Department presentations to Congress regularly underscored the growing professionalization and fighting capability of the Afghan military. The December 2012 “Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan” was typical, highlighting that Afghan forces were carrying out 80 percent of operations and had successfully recruited enough Afghans to meet the authorized ceiling of 352,000 troops and police. The November 2013 “Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan” went further: “Afghan security forces are now successfully providing security for their own people, fighting their own battles,” and could hold the gains “made by a coalition of 50 nations with the best trained and equipped forces in the world.” By 2014, Afghan forces [reportedly](#) “led 99 percent of conventional operations and 99 percent of special operations” and remained “at just under the full authorized level of 352,000 personnel.”

Even as the situation on the ground deteriorated, a 2017 report described the ANDSF as “generally capable of protecting major population centers . . . and responding to Taliban attacks.”

Only in the last few years did reports begin to reflect a more concerning reality. In [2017](#) and again in [2019](#), there were reports that tens of thousands of “ghost” soldiers were being removed from the rolls—suggesting that there were never close to 330,000 troops available to fight the Taliban, let alone 352,000. The Defense Department’s [December 2020](#) report to Congress noted that only “approximately 298,000 ANDSF personnel were eligible for pay,” hinting at the recurring problem with “ghost” soldiers and desertions.

The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) also regularly highlighted problems tracking equipment and salaries. Waste, fraud, and mismanagement of resources meant to transform the Afghan military further undermined the fighting capability of the ANDSF. The measure of waste and fraud runs into the billions of dollars with corruption often involving senior Afghan government officials. SIGAR did manage to expose much of this, but more should have been done to stop it.

## **THE ERODING STALEMATE**

On the battlefield from 2013 onward, the Taliban seemed to gain ground every year in what came to be called an “eroding stalemate” in Washington parlance—even with the 2013 death of Taliban founder Mullah Omar, his successor’s assassination in 2016, and the heaviest coalition bombardments of the war in 2018–19.

The seeds for that eroding stalemate were sown early on. The failure to invest in Afghanistan’s police and military in the first years after 2001 meant a loss of valuable time to build a capable fighting force when the Taliban were on the defensive. The building of an air force was not prioritized for more than a decade; the training of a new generation of Afghan pilots began only in 2009 and was slower than necessary because of a decision to transition the Afghan fleet from Russian craft to Black Hawks. And while the Afghan air force had more recently come to be seen as relatively effective, any success was undermined by the decision this year to withdraw the thousands of contractors who provided maintenance and support for operations as U.S. advisers began to leave in 2019.

Indeed, the failure to transfer the services of the 18,000 contractors who worked with the Afghan military—or to provide the financial guarantees to cover the costs—proved damaging to the government in Kabul, although it is now unclear whether the ANDSF would have fought even with that support. These services may have sustained the logistics flow to the ANDSF in the field and the maintenance of the Afghan air force despite the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Instead, July nighttime U.S. departure from Bagram Air Base, a key logistics fulcrum, will become an enduring symbol of our military failure in Afghanistan. (The failure to maintain a logistics capability had another consequence: hampering the evacuation of embassy personnel and tens of thousands of Afghans, beyond just interpreters, who worked with the U.S. military, diplomatic mission, and assistance programs.)

Meanwhile, the counterinsurgency strategy embraced by the United States never demonstrated an ability to bring sustained gains. As former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mike Mullen told an interviewer this week, he opposed the extension of the U.S. surge past 2011 because “if we did not have significant progress or show significant progress over the course of 18 months or so, then we had the wrong strategy and we really needed to recalibrate.” Yet until the decision to withdraw, such a recalibration never came.

Year after year, Afghan soldiers went months without pay and without the necessary supplies to defend themselves. More recently, provincial capitals do not appear to have been adequately reinforced, even though it was clear 18 months ago that the United States intended to withdraw troops within a year of the Doha agreement that the Trump administration struck with the Taliban in February 2020. As the Taliban advance intensified in the past weeks, Afghan soldiers were also let down by their commanders and political leaders, who over 20 years have failed abysmally to earn national allegiance. It is striking how incapable Afghanistan’s government was of issuing any rallying cry for the nation as its defenses collapsed. This context helps explain why the ANDSF did not fight in recent days.

Another misjudgment relates to the weakness of regional warlords. Since 2001, there has been a broad assumption that these warlords commanded thousands of armed followers who could be mobilized quickly against the Taliban. Both the United States and the national Afghan government believed this to be the case and accommodated often brutal local leaders as a result. The fall of Sheberghan, stronghold of former Vice President (and human rights violator) Abdul Rashid Dostum; of Herat, previously under the sway of former mujahideen leader Ismail Khan; and of Mazar-e Sharif, formerly run by Atta Nur, reveal how deeply flawed that assumption was. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani appealed for assistance from these warlords, only to find they had no forces to rally—a sorry commentary on the state of the national government, the army, and the U.S. reading of a fragmented Afghan political reality.

The United States also overestimated its ability to address another factor that fundamentally undermined the war effort: Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan. For years, U.S. leaders sought the support of Islamabad for a peaceful resolution of the war in Afghanistan. They failed; Islamabad was more interested in keeping its options open on Afghanistan. Yet even after 9/11 mastermind al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was found hiding in Abbottabad, the United States retained close ties to Pakistan given the country’s broader regional importance.

It is extraordinarily difficult to defeat an insurgency that has a [cross-border](#) sanctuary. The Taliban leadership in Quetta and Peshawar raised funds, planned attacks, and recruited without hindrance. The Afghan government asked repeatedly for Pakistan’s assistance in closing Taliban bases. Yet Pakistan’s minister of the interior admitted in July 2021 that Taliban families lived in Islamabad suburbs.

## **MISREADING AFGHAN REALITIES**

Why did an effective Afghan government fail to emerge over 20 years? The United States certainly tried to help produce one. Our efforts to impose a Western democratic model on

Afghanistan, first at the Bonn conference in 2001 and through the writing of the national constitution, continued over two decades.

Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai complained often about overbearing U.S. political influence. Such “interference” often seemed to keep Afghan politics on track—but with unexpected consequences. When Richard Holbrooke, then the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, sought to influence the 2009 election, he succeeded not in stopping a Karzai victory but only in turning the Afghan president into an enemy. In 2014, when U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry brokered a government of national unity as the threat of civil conflict loomed, the result was an uneasy political compromise, between President Ghani and challenger Abdullah Abdullah, that never settled. In the next presidential election, in 2019, fewer than two million Afghans voted, down from eight million just five years before. The contested result hardly suggested Afghanistan’s democracy was consolidating at a time when the Taliban threat was increasing.

By the time the unity government leaders visited Washington to meet President Joe Biden in June 2021, unity was nonexistent except in name, and Ghani’s presidential palace was increasingly isolated. Yet many in Washington continued to [assume](#) a semblance of common purpose regarding the looming Taliban threat.

Afghanistan’s national political leadership never fully cohered on how best to fight the Taliban. There were tensions between regional power brokers and Kabul, and between Pashtuns and the minority Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks. Both Karzai and Ghani managed ethnic representation through a spoils system rather than the promotion of a common national vision. And U.S. efforts to identify, even select, leaders in ministries succeeded only in undermining the independence and legitimacy of the Afghan government.

The Taliban, by contrast, proved resilient not just as a military and terrorist organization but as a political movement as well. After 2001, the Taliban continued to enjoy popular support in parts of Afghanistan and retained the ability to field tens of thousands of new generations of young Afghan adherents. Even during the “surge” of U.S. troops in 2009–11, the Taliban proved able to evolve. The Afghan government’s efforts to reconcile with the Taliban from 2010 onward represented an implicit acceptance of their political and military salience inside Afghanistan. The decision by the United States to negotiate formally with the Taliban in 2018, and of foreign governments to welcome Taliban emissaries after the Doha agreement of February 2020, reflected that reality.

We misread the Taliban when we were fighting them; we also misread their more recent pledge to negotiate peace as they shadow-boxed in Doha with the Ghani government after reaching agreement with the United States on the withdrawal timetable. They never had any intention of reaching a settlement. (The notion that the Taliban have changed seems even more naïve now, given the disturbing images emerging from the current takeover.) Yet that intention was in some ways mirrored by the United States: the ultimate goal of American negotiators was to create the conditions for an orderly U.S. withdrawal. The Taliban always knew that.



Now, threats to withhold international recognition as the Taliban capture Kabul by force mean little. Taliban leaders are not concerned about whether the United States recognizes them as a government; other international actors probably will no matter what Washington does.

Another series of misjudgments and mistakes related to American ambitions when it came to “nation building.” To American officials, much of what was being done seemed to work. The United States worked to support a representative government, strengthen the legislature, and provide for both a degree of security and the delivery of social services. Its efforts transformed Afghan education, with an exponential growth in the number of girls in school and of women at university and in the workplace. Civil rights were codified, and a free press and judiciary came into being. Millions of refugees returned to Afghanistan in the years after 2001.

Yet even with these successes, we oversold the gains. And we did less than we could have about corruption, knowingly working with senior government and military figures that ordinary Afghans saw as responsible for graft and political and human rights abuses. Our counternarcotics program was an abject failure: poppy production continued to increase for most of the past decade, with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimating a 37 percent [increase](#) in acres under cultivation in 2020. The hope that Afghanistan’s economic growth would eventually allow the government to cover its own expenditures was advanced year after year at donors’ conferences, even though that clearly would not be the case for the foreseeable future. Grandiose projects languished: it took 15 years to install a new turbine on Kajaki Dam, a symbol of American largess toward Afghanistan in the 1950s.

## **WHO LOST AFGHANISTAN?**

In February 2021, the congressionally mandated Afghanistan Study Group came out with its recommendations for the way forward. It highlighted the importance of continued support for the Afghan state and people; of continued diplomacy in support of a peace process; of working with regional allies; and of extending the U.S. troop presence to allow for the Doha peace negotiations to conclude. All but one of these policies were in effect before and after the report was issued, but they did nothing to stem the collapse we are witnessing now. The survival of the Afghan state should not have been solely dependent on the continuation of an American troop presence.

There is one seductive argument made by critics of the withdrawal: that a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan will again become a haven for terrorist groups threatening the security of the United States. This argument is a backhanded acknowledgment that we succeeded in reducing the threat from Afghanistan to minimal levels—the original rationale for U.S. intervention. The sacrifice, however, was significant: more than \$1 trillion, the deaths of 2,400 U.S. service members (and thousands of contractors), more than 20,000 wounded Americans.

Perhaps the [resurgence](#) of a terrorist threat will develop more quickly under a future Taliban government than it would have otherwise. But to conclude that this outcome demands an indefinite U.S. troop presence would imply that U.S. troops should also be deployed indefinitely in the many other parts of the world where Islamic State (also known as ISIS) and al Qaeda offshoots are active in greater numbers than they are in Afghanistan and pose a greater threat to

the United States. Moreover, U.S. capabilities to monitor and strike at terrorist groups have grown exponentially since 2001.

Ultimately, Washington's decision to withdraw U.S. troops is not the sole or even most important explanation for what is unfolding in Afghanistan today. The explanation lies in 20 years of failed policies and the shortcomings of Afghanistan's political leadership. We can still hope that we in the United States do not end up in a poisonous debate about "who lost Afghanistan." But if we do, let's acknowledge that it was all of us.