

northeast. Importantly the city was also commercially connected to Pakistan in the south via Chaman, Quetta. Interestingly the area between Kandahar and Spin Boldak, the border town with Pakistan, was under the control of local commanders of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar. Local commanders were exercising their control by establishing check posts for financial and power shows. Travelers and business people had to pay large sums at these check posts to cross and conduct commercial activities. Refusal to pay would lead to total extortion of valuables, detention, torture, rape, and molestation. Kabul, predominantly and the rest of the country, in general, was under total insecurity and disorder due to infighting between the war and tribal lords for political control.

In September 1994, a religious group known as the Taliban, on the call of the local populace, rose and took up arms against the atrocities of local armed lords to deliver justice and save them from the brutalities committed by the local militias. A religious leader of a local masjid on the outskirts of Kandahar, Mullah Muhammad Omar, became the commander, started resolving the dispute, and conducted armed operations against the armed groups in Kandahar city and around.¹ The local population and the business community supported the Taliban being considered saviors for delivering justice, security, and peace. Within weeks, the Taliban were in control of the border town of Spin Boldak, overpowering Hikmatyar's fighters. The Taliban also captured a sizeable arms and ammunition depot in the border area of Boldak.² With the support of locals and the Pakistani military establishment, the Taliban increased their rank-and-file abilities along with transportation. They marched towards Kandahar city, which was under the control of Mullah Naqibullah. Naqibullah negotiated surrender, and the Taliban took control of the city along with a large military garrison. A large quantity of weaponry, ammunition, artillery guns, armored vehicles, helicopters, and Mig-21 fighter aircraft were captured by the Taliban.³

A strategic and commercial road linking Kandahar with Chaman, Quetta, Pakistan, came under the control of the Taliban in a matter of days. By October 1994 Taliban were in total control of Kandahar and were organizing military to launch operations in adjoining towns and provinces. Taliban established their administrative setup in Kandahar, which later became the de facto capital of the Taliban and Afghanistan. Soon Taliban were in control of the provinces of Helmond, Farah, and Zabul.

Pakistan, which had rendered support to Mujahideen fighters against the Soviets for its geostrategic interest and also at the behest of the US, became disenchanted with the Mujahideen commanders due to the infighting for political objectives and slowly started withdrawing its support in 1994.⁴ With the emergence of the Taliban, Pakistan anticipated another important and powerful group that could serve its interests and bring peace to Afghanistan. Therefore, it started supporting the Madrassas graduated

Taliban fighters. Taliban were considered radical Islamists, who were mostly educated from madrassas in Afghanistan and Pakistan, enthusiastic and often sincere, not high-grade Quranic scholars or even thinkers amongst the leaders. Pashtun ethnically, the Taliban had no governmental affairs experts nor were skilled in other fields. Led by Mullah Muhammad Omar, Amir ul Momineen, also called Omar Mujahid, had lost one eye fighting the Soviets and all his deputies were war veterans of the Jihad. Taliban were not a new

¹ Neamatollah Nojumi, "The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region". Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009.

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Joseph J. Collins, "Understanding War in Afghanistan": Defense Technical Information Center, first. Fort Belvoir, VA 2011, <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA546476>

phenomenon; they had fought the Soviets under the mujahideen banner and were the most effective and die-hard fighters among the various jihadi groups. This time they were called Taliban and not mujahideen.

Though the Taliban's abrupt emergence is attributed to Sang-e-Hisar, Panjwai, Kandahar incident, where two girls were abducted and raped by the local commanders, the ground had already been set for the Taliban kind of an uprising and force emergence.⁵ After the USSR withdrawal in 1989 and the type of government in Kabul, Afghanistan had to fall into war with itself. Mullah Omar, the Taliban, and many others believed that the Kabul government is corrupt and inefficient. For the followers of Mullah Omar, the civil war in Afghanistan was fueled due to outside interference. Jihad's success was ruined by the selfish political objectives of the Mujahideen commanders, who had started fighting each other in a power struggle. The Afghanistan crisis was not only the infighting between the Mujahideen and the foreign support; Mullah Omar believed that the Afghan nation had lost its right way of following the religion of Islam. This astray has contributed to anarchy and disorder in the country. Taliban believed that the absence of Sharia Law in the country was the cause of all ills; therefore its enforcement was necessary. "We all witnessed what happened when there was no shari'a law in the country. The last few years are a good example of the disaster a society faces without a strict code or law."⁶

Taliban's objective resonated that Afghanistan had to return to normal, and they were in to provide justice and security on a religious basis. For the Taliban, their success was not attributed to the military but was due to the masses' support, who were discontent and desperate to return to normality. Mullah Omar stated in 1995: "We asked the religious scholars for their advice and received a shari'a-based decree from them. In light of this decree from our religious scholars, we started our armed resistance to the corrupt regime in Kabul. We started this movement to protect the faith, implement the shari'a law, and safeguard our sovereignty."⁷

By October 1994 Taliban had taken control of Kandahar and adjoining provinces, and by 1995 they had transformed themselves into an organized military and political force. They had organized into groups, developing capabilities to train, organize a fighting force, raise finance to sustain, fight and negotiate. Within four months of their emergence, the Taliban established departments, committees, and offices though poorly functioning yet effective in healthcare, economic development, security, law and order, and predominantly justice.⁸ After having gained an initial foothold in Kandahar, the Taliban expanded rapidly and, by 1995 were knocking at the doors of Kabul.

Having sensed masses support during the Kandahar capture, the Taliban felt confident about further successes. Their primary objective was the formation of a viable Afghan state and the holding of total power. They expanded in ranks and territory, mostly through negotiation and integration, but they kept fighting options open and exercised throughout their tenure. Taliban leadership believed that too many armed groups were operating in the country, and those had to be disarmed to obtain peace and security. The reality is that the Soviet invasion was resisted through ethnic factional, and religious armed groups that fought for a decade and continued to exist even after the Soviet withdrawal. To the world, the Taliban were asking for more than

⁵ Neamatollah Nojumi, "The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War, and the Future of the Region". Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009.

⁶ Felix Kuehn. "Taliban History of War and Peace in Afghanistan." Accord an International Review of Peace Initiatives, Accord, ISSUE 27 (June 2018): 6.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

possible as they wanted to disarm all other groups. Taliban, on the other hand, carried diverse points of view; they were not like other armed groups, who strived for power, nor were they party to the civil war which started after the Soviet exit. Taliban came in to end the civil war and stop the atrocities that the warlords and their associates committed. According to the Taliban, their objective was not to exclude people but was quite different than perceived by the outside world.⁹ They were not aligned with any group, nor were they based on ethnicity, nor had any political ambition, but were trying to implement the Islamic system of life and governance, for which the Afghans had contested the Soviets. Sharia implementation or desire was not new for any Muslim-majority country. According to Mullah Omar, “Taliban was trying its best and making all sorts of possible efforts to prevent any potential conflict in the country.”¹⁰ Taliban’s propagated goals were justice, security, peace, and rule through the Sharia system.

By September 1996, the Taliban had taken control of Kabul, the capital city. They announced an Islamic government in the country. The government was formed with the appointment of ministers, primarily based on the same lines of ministries that already existed. It was a transitional government, and the Taliban stated that the country’s future would be decided after the war. After taking over Kabul, the Taliban aspired and continued their military campaign towards the north, where Northern Alliance, headed by Ahmed Shah Masood, was challenging the Taliban’s total control. In the years to come, the Taliban would control around 85 % of Afghan territory, less Panjshir Valley, Badakhshan, and Takhar province, contested by Ahmed Shah Masood. Besides military campaigns against the opponents, from 1996 onwards, the Taliban did try to redress the hurting issues of the Afghan society and government, Taliban considered essential to end the crisis. Taliban did try to negotiate peace with the opposition but were looking to total submission under their terms; therefore, their effort yielded no positive results. Taliban looked at Northern Alliance as untrustworthy, so the war continued till the end of Taliban rule in 2002. The opposition rallied around Ahmed Shah Masood as the central figure of resistance, who was fighting the Taliban from his native and favorite area of Panjshir valley and adjoining provinces of Takhar, Badakhshan, part of Kapisa, Baghlan, and Nuristan. Masood, the “Lion of Panjshir,” resisted the Taliban and defeated them repeatedly in their offensive directed towards his strongholds. Masood could not be defeated although repeated efforts by the Taliban and ultimately was killed in a suicide attack two days prior to the twin tower attacks in New York.

The fragile, crumbling, disputed regime of Rabbani could not sustain and lost control to the Taliban in 1996, who by then had obtained the support of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani. In September 1996, in control of affairs in Kabul, the Taliban arrested Najibullah and his brother, killed them, and hanged their bodies with a lamp post near Arg, the presidential palace. Masood retreated to Panjshir and was joined by Uzbek commander Dostum, Hazara fighters under Mohaqiq, Ismail Khan from Herat, and Tajik fighters.¹¹ Taliban pursued their drive towards the north, captured Mazar-e-Sharif, lost it, and again captured it in 1998 from Uzbek fighters; both sides lost thousands of lives in fighting and brutalities. Throughout their rule, the Taliban continued to assert pressure over Northern Alliance, who were contesting them in northern Afghanistan. Taliban were aided by al-Qaeda and foreign fighters, including Pakistan.

Taliban Amir-u-Momineen, Mullah Muhammad Omar, remained based in Kandahar, the de facto capital, but the capital city remained Kabul. Taliban had appointed their president and ministers, who would mostly

⁹ Felix Kuehn. “Taliban History of War and Peace in Afghanistan.” *Accord an International Review of Peace Initiatives*, Accord, ISSUE 27 (June 2018): 6.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Joseph J. Collins, “Understanding War in Afghanistan”: Defense Technical Information Center, first. Fort Belvoir, VA 2011. <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA546476>

stay in Kabul. Mullah Omar was accorded great respect and was supported by Pakistani religious elements along with the military establishment. Taliban regime was formally recognized as legitimate rulers by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and UAE. However, the diplomatic presence remained low except for Pakistan, which had an embassy in Kabul and four consulates. Interesting to note is that Afghanistan's seat at the UN remained occupied by the formal regime of Burhan Uddin Rabbani, along with most of the embassies abroad.¹²

The Demise of the Taliban Regime

Taliban offensive against Northern Alliance, composed of predominantly non-Pashtun Afghans, was launched every year during the warring season in Afghanistan (summers). Having lost Mazar-e-Sharif in 1998, the Northern alliance got restricted to the northeastern territory of Afghanistan. Ahmed Shah Masood, the head of NA, got his forces based in and around Panjshir valley. Territory under his control was rugged mountainous terrain, with snow-clad peaks and narrow valleys, from where he had fought the Russian forces. Despite repeated attempts and summer offensives, the Taliban failed to overpower Masood's forces. By 2001, the Taliban had control over most of Afghanistan, less the territory controlled by Masood or Northern Alliance.¹³ Taliban had physical control over the country, but they failed to increase or sustain initial masses support. Yet the anti-Taliban alliance could not muster sizable support to defeat and overpower the Taliban from within the country, who were tired from decades of fighting. Besides, the populace largely discredited the anti-Taliban alliance for having failed to deliver and drag the country to civil war. Notably, the Taliban were a group of fighters mainly Afghans but in their ranks were Pakistani and Arab fighters also.¹⁴

After having taken control of a major portion of the country and installed their government, they enforced a Sharia-based system, especially the law and order.¹⁵ Having no experience in governance and state affairs handlers in their top hierarchy, they appeared completely puzzled, about how to run the governmental affairs in the domains of economy, foreign affairs, and even internal affairs. The situation in stated spheres went from bad to worst with the passage of time. They did perform better in law and order, judiciary, and drug control. Taliban were globally criticized for their repressive policies. These policies included: -

- Prohibition of females outside without burka (veil) and male relatives.
- Prohibition of music, shaving, keeping pigeons and birds fighting, kite flying, picture making, making hairstyles, and shaving of beards.
- Mandatory prayers by all males were forced.
- Total ban on the use and business of narcotics and gambling.
- Interest-based financial system was prohibited.
- Playing music and dancing at weddings was banned.

The most dreaded enforcement force was the Ministry for Promotion of Virtue and Extermination of Sin, which enforced the Islamic practices and decrees issued by the government. Women who were observed in violation were physically mistreated. Serious crimes were publicly punished and publicized. Besides human rights violations (as per global standards), the Taliban government was also criticized for their strict policies and actions against, art and culture, literature/ books burning, the national museum in Kabul, and some of

¹² Joseph J. Collins, p-38

¹³ Barry M. Rubin, Guide to Islamist Movements. M.E. Sharpe, 2010. P-181-197

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Joseph J. Collins, "Understanding War in Afghanistan": Defense Technical Information Center, first. Fort Belvoir, VA 2011. <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA546476>

the archeological assets, and relics were destroyed. The most disapproved act was the destruction of Bamiyan Buddhas despite objections by the UN and many countries.

The worst and most objected aspect of Taliban rule was the support, shelter, and adaption of al-Qaeda. Osama Bin Laden, the erst-while financier of the Mujahideen against the USSR, traveled back to Afghanistan in early 1996¹⁶ from Sudan, where he was considered a threat to the state. Afghanistan with the Islamic caliphate was considered a safe place by OBL, though he had no prior interaction with Mullah Omar, but regarded him in high esteem. OBL and his fighters were provided shelter in Afghanistan in return for financial help and assistance, which the Taliban were in dire need of, besides training of Taliban fighters, planning, and advice. OBL established his base in Kandahar, where Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters got trained throughout the Taliban rule. Thousands of Afghans and foreign fighters passed through OBL training camps and were later combat-trained by fighting the Northern Alliance in northern Afghanistan. This assistance and support program raised Al-Qaeda's value in the eyes of Mullah Omar.

In 1998, Al-Qaida was blamed for conducting terror acts against US diplomatic missions in Kenya and Tanzania in Africa. The US retaliated by launching cruise missile attacks at Al-Qaeda camps in Khost, eastern Afghanistan. These strikes missed OBL by a few hours. The US had made many attempts before and after the Khost strikes to capture and kill Osama but were unsuccessful. The 9/11 commission report concluded that twin tower attackers had received initial training in Afghanistan.¹⁷ The initial and detailed plan, guidance, finances, and concept were conceived in Al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan.¹⁸ The US and the KSA had asked the Taliban regime in 1998, to hand over OBL to the US for legal proceedings, but the Taliban refused to extradite OBL even after the embassies bombing in Africa. After the terror attack on USS Cole in Yemen, the US again asked for OBL extradition but the Taliban did not respond positively. AlQaida was considered a terrorist group in 2001, based in Afghanistan under the protective shelter of the Taliban, who for the benefit of money, ideology, hospitality, and self-interests, kept their eyes off OBL activities.

During Taliban's quest for total victory, especially the fighting against ASM, resulted in quantum losses and casualties. The UN sanctions and US embargo, coupled with continued fighting made the Taliban suffer serious losses both in the fighting cadre and financial outlays. Yet the alliance with AQ/OBL kept them in Al-Qaeda orbit and Afghanistan became the hub of extremism and militancy for Islamic ideological elements. In October 1998, Ahmed Shah Masood informed the US Senate that: - "This is a crucial and unique moment in the history of Afghanistan and the world, a time when Afghanistan has crossed yet another threshold and is entering a new state of struggle and resistance for its survival as a free nation and independent state . . . Today, the world clearly sees and feels the results of such misguided [external interfering by our Cold War allies] and evil deeds. South-Central Asia is in turmoil, with some countries on the brink of war. Illegal drug production, terrorist activities, and planning are on the rise. Ethnic and religiously motivated mass murders and forced displacements are taking place, and the most basic human and women's rights are shamelessly violated. The country has gradually been occupied by fanatics, extremists, terrorists, mercenaries, and drug Mafias. One faction, the Taliban, which by no means rightly

¹⁶ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Osama bin Laden." Encyclopedia Britannica, April 28, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Osama-bin-Laden>.

¹⁷ "The 9/11 Commission Report." 2021. <https://9-11commission.Gov/Report/>. Accessed August 19. <https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf>.

¹⁸ Thomas H. Kean, and Lee Hamilton, "The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States". Official government ed. Washington, DC: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States: U.S. G.P.O, 2004.

represents Islam, Afghanistan, or our centuries-old cultural heritage, has, with direct foreign assistance, exacerbated this explosive situation.”¹⁹

Afghanistan was the first target of Talibanization which later contributed to extremism in the region and even internationally, Pakistan was gravely influenced by this phenomenon. The prime figure standing in way of the Taliban’s total control of Afghanistan was ASM, restricted to the northeastern corner of the country and in possession of about 15 percent of the territory. To achieve complete victory, the ASM-led opposition had to be eliminated, only then Taliban supported by Al-Qaeda’s mission could be accomplished. Masood in 2000, had started engagement with US and CIA for obtaining financial and arms support to resist the Taliban.²⁰ Having sensed the coming danger of mustering and enhancing the potency of the anti-Taliban alliance, Al-Qaeda took a preemptive, though is speculated. On 9 September 2001, two suicide attackers, posing as journalists assassinated Ahmed Shah Masood.²¹ Al-Qaeda and the Taliban were blamed for the killing of Masood, as they were the major beneficiaries of his death. With the gap of two days, on 11 September 2001, ‘allegedly’ Al-Qaeda fighters highjacked four American passenger planes and crashed them into World Trade Center and Pentagon. Thousands of civilians were killed mostly American nationals.

This terror attack on American soil became the primary cause of converting Afghanistan into a war theater between the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and the US. In October 2001, the US and its allies launched a military campaign in Afghanistan named operation “Enduring Freedom”. Within Afghanistan, the US was supported by the fighters of the Northern Alliance, who were the first to capture Mazar-e-Sharif, the capital city of Balkh province in northern Afghanistan.²² Within days, the US forces, who were already positioned north of Kabul in Panjshir valley and surrounds, advanced towards Kabul. In quite a big number, the general public, who were fed up with the Taliban way of governance, especially in the north and northwest, rose against the rulers and freed the cities, at places through armed struggle even before the arrival of foreign forces. In December 2001, the UN and the US-supported conference was held in Bonn, Germany, to formalize the post-Taliban governmental structure for Afghanistan. Under Bonn Agreement, an interim setup was to be established in Kabul, headed by Hamid Karzai, a Popalzai Pashtun from Kandahar, under the security arrangements of international forces, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).²³ The first transitional government was formed on 22 December 2001, Hamid Karzai was nominated as the Chairman, and in June 2002, following the Bonn Agreement, Loya Jirga was convened which approved Hamid Karzai as the president of Afghanistan.

Some Operational Accounts of Taliban Demise

Having suffered a unique kind of terror attack on the US mainland, the first step that the US took was to demand the handover of OBL from the Taliban, which was flatly refused by Mullah Omar. A Pakistani military delegation headed by a general from ISI went to Kandahar, met Mullah Omar, and tried to convince

¹⁹ Neamatols Nojumi. “The Rise and Fall of the Taliban “. Robert D. Crews, Amin Tarzi, The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. 112.

²⁰ Steve Coll. Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001. 2005. London: Penguin Books.

²¹ Wolf, Paul. 2003. “The Assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud.” The Assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud. Centre for Research on Globalisation. September 14. <https://archives.globalresearch.ca/articles/WOL309A.html>.

²² Robert D.Crews, Amin Tarzi. The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

²³ “CFC - Afghanistan Agreements June2012.” reliefweb.int, 2012. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CFC_Afghanistan_Agreements_June2012.pdf.

him to hand over OBL and associates to the US. Taliban tried for a bargain, demanded recognition of the Taliban government, ending support to Northern Alliance, and foreign aid resumption.²⁴ Mullah Omar also asked for convincing evidence of OBL's involvement in the World Trade Center attacks. The refusal of Mullah Omar went to the benefit of Osama, who slipped away thereby relegating the US response in form of espionage and policing to capture him later. Taliban had no understanding of the US military might and the mindset, Mullah Omar had fought the Russians and considered the US at par with the Soviets. Situated too far away to attack Afghanistan, he may have not considered the US military attack. The delegation failed to convince Taliban leadership and the US had no option but to invade Afghanistan to avenge WTC attacks.

President Bush in his address to the congress and nation, looked determined and asked the Taliban to respond immediately to the US demands. The President said that "The course of this conflict is not known yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war. And we know that God is not neutral between them. . . . We'll meet violence with patient justice, assured of the rightness of our cause and confident of the victories to come. In all that lies before us, may God grant us wisdom, and may He watch over the United States of America".²⁵

On 7 October 2001, an air attack was launched against the Taliban in Afghanistan. 15 bomber aircraft and 25 carrier-based fighter bombers took part in the first wave of attack, and fifty Tomahawk missiles were fired from US and British warships based in the Arabian sea. Taliban command centers, shelters, and airfields were targeted resulting in the destruction of a small Taliban air force.²⁶ The air attacks with stealth (B-2) bombers and B-1 bombers continued and seven Taliban compounds were destroyed with no account of casualties, but they were hastily abandoned. These airstrikes attracted severe criticism because the UN compound in Kabul was hit resulting in the death of four workers, besides civilian casualties.²⁷ In another airstrike, 2K bomb landed at a house killing all inmates. Abdul Haq, the famous Mujahideen commander, stated that the air strategy was becoming counterproductive due to the civilians' deaths. On 19 October commandos, airdropped through helicopters, attacked one of Mullah Omar's compounds in the Kandahar and Kandahar airfield.²⁸ Two days later American air attacks were directed against the Taliban frontline in Kabul, but the Taliban had already vacated the area.

After a week of aerial bombing with no substantive effects, the Northern Alliance began criticizing the effort. The bad part was that bombs were falling off the targets resulting in civilian casualties, in one incident 13 civilians were killed, and this attracted severe criticism. The unproductive air bombing got media attention both inside and outside the US press but the positive side did not attract even the Northern Alliance. The US realized the ineffectiveness of the aerial bombing and introduced special forces into the combat zone to spot and direct the airstrikes. Taliban fighters, got highly depressed as they could not respond to the US air superiority and got devastated. The US air bombing methodology was criticized, yet the collateral damage

²⁴ Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: a Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2003.

²⁵ eMediaMillWorks. "Text: President Bush Addresses the Nation." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, September 20, 2001.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html.

²⁶ Stephen Tanner, *In Afghanistan: a Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban*, 289–320. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2003.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

was much lower as compared to the Gulf war, where the civilian casualty rate was higher than in Afghanistan. This all was due to precision-guided munition, laser and satellite-guided missile systems, and target acquisition prior to engagement. Yet after a month of softening the targets, the US strategy received condemnation from Europe, the Middle East, and Pakistan. Taliban troops, which were still holding on to some positions would occasionally strike the NA troops. The foreign forces, around fifty thousand in theater, with a million in reserve outside the theater, were still to pursue the war objectives.

By November 2001, Turan Ismail Khan, Tajik mujahideen leader from Herat, returned to his previous stronghold Herat in the West, Abdul Rashid Dostum, the famous Uzbek warlord from northern Afghanistan, was back home fully reorganized. Mohaqiq, the Hazara commander of the Shia sect was reluctant to return, Ustad Atta Noor, ex-Northern Alliance, again Tajik from Mazar-e-Sharif, returned to his native area and was cooperating with Dostum. Taliban forces could not resist and surrendered. The cities of Taluqan and Kunduz were attacked by the Northern Alliance forces and Taluqan fell without fight and bloodshed. The area north of the city was however contested by Taliban fighters mostly foreigners, who did not surrender fearing brutal treatment from Northern Alliance. The US air force was supporting the ground operation of NA.

Taliban's harsh fundamental rule was never accepted by the populace, especially the non-Pashtun. Kabul was a modern city and stood apart from the tough religious practices of the Taliban. Jalalabad, in the east, was abandoned by the Taliban, almost at the same time when Kabul was captured. Gul Badin Hikmatyar remained in exile in Iran, however, his loyalists did return sometime later and started exerting their political influence in their erstwhile areas, especially south of Kabul. Less ASM, who was no more alive, all erstwhile mujahideen commanders, who fought the Russians, were resuming their lost positions. Northern Afghanistan was captured less Kunduz, the Pashtun-dominated province in the north.

Though the Taliban were defeated in the north rumors existed that they vacated positions and withdrew to safe areas, or to some they fell back to their native towns in the south. The victory was celebrated by all, especially the Americans, right in the early days. The situation in Kunduz was not clear as the Taliban were still holding on to their positions and reports were coming that local Pashtun fighters were ready to surrender but the Arabs were forcing them not to lay arms. Kunduz finally fell by the end of November. The situation in the south was also not good for the Taliban. Taliban vacated Kandahar in early December. Almost two months into the US offensive and the de facto capital of the Taliban regime, Kandahar was abandoned. A couple of days later, Zabul, a city close to Pakistan's border in the south also fell to invading forces, ending traces of Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

The unexpected and total collapse of the Taliban was a surprise to the invading forces. It was assumed that the Taliban, in fact, were never strong enough to contest any good military and they had concealed their fragility from the world throughout their rule. Pakistani support probably was the major factor that kept Taliban rule alive. Withdrawal of Pakistani support, the arrival of US airpower, and not an organized and trained Taliban militarily were the major factors for the sudden collapse of the Taliban. Another important factor was that the Afghans themselves fought the Taliban and overthrew them. A few years back Taliban were welcomed by the same populace to retrieve the country from anarchy but the Taliban could not govern this difficult and politically divided country. The US achieved the success of removing the Taliban from power but failed to kill or capture Mullah Omar and other top leaders of the regime. The most wanted Osama bin Laden, leader of Al-Qaeda, was not captured.

Despite having controlled a major portion of Afghanistan and implementing Sharia laws, the Taliban brand of Islam did not last, and neither the regime became a viable state, but the regime had implications in the region and beyond. The after-effects of the Taliban movement continued to persist even after their removal from power. Taliban continued to attract support and became a base for global militancy. Mujahideen/Taliban rise had strong roots in regional and global politics in the 80s and 90s and the Taliban demise also was due to a crucial shift in international politics.

Resurgence of Taliban

“The price for leaving too soon or in an uncoordinated way could be very high ... Afghanistan risks becoming once again a platform for international terrorists to plan and organize attacks on our homelands. And ISIS could rebuild in Afghanistan the terror caliphate it lost in Syria and Iraq.”

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg

Source: Reuters, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, “NATO chief warns against rapid troop withdrawal from Afghanistan,” 11/17/2020

Introduction. The Afghan Taliban, who ruled Afghanistan till 2001, was toppled by the US and its allies for sheltering Al-Qaeda and not extraditing them on US demands after the 9/11 twin tower terror attacks. After the capture of Kabul, Kandahar, and many other important cities in the north, central and southern parts of the country, it was widely believed that the Taliban had been ultimately defeated. But the Taliban, an estimated sixty to seventy thousand irregular fighters at their peak, remained the most vigorous militant group in Afghanistan. Despite being contested for about two decades by the most powerful army in the world, the Taliban persisted as a challenging force holding sway over the Afghan populace in Southern and Eastern parts of the country. Having relished in Pakistan tribal areas, the Taliban existed and survived the American and international onslaught in Afghanistan and became a tough insurgent/ guerrilla force and a political entity that was finally engaged by the US for negotiating peace in Afghanistan.

By 2003, the Taliban had started showing signs of re-emergence. Isolated attacks on the Afghan government and later the international forces had become almost daily routes in later years. By 2005, the war in Afghanistan was being taken as insurgency and treated as such. The drawdown of NATO and the US forces in 2014 was another indicator of Taliban resurgence. However, it was also taken as a success of the international effort to restore security and democracy.

The US, in the longest war in history, and the nascent ANSF, which was then responsible for the security of the country, continued to face serious challenges in securing and holding the territory, especially the population centers being contested by Taliban and ISIS, who were fighting an insurgency through suicide attacks, target killings, targeting both soft and hard targets all over the country. The outcome remained a stalemate, and as per the US estimates of 2019, 53.8 percent of the country's districts were under the government's influence and control, 33.9 percent were contested, and 12.3 percent were controlled by the Taliban.²⁹ The national security forces were undergoing heavy losses, though actual figures remain

²⁹ Global Conflict Tracker, “War in Afghanistan”. Council on Foreign Relations, 2020.
<https://www.cfr.org/globalconflict-tracker/conflict/war-afghanistan>.

classified, yet as per estimates, only in 2018, thirty to forty officials were getting killed every day.³⁰ 2018 witnessed the highest civil casualties, while 2019 did witness some decline, with around 3500 civilians killed and about 7000 injured. The total number of documented civilian casualties' figure of the UN is more than 100,000 in the last ten years. The US and its Allies lost nearly 3500 soldiers and around ten thousand injured since 2001.³¹ Over twenty thousand civilians became victims of the insurgency, and about three million were displaced, as per the UN assessment.

Having resisted the international forces for about two decades, the situation in 2021 was that the Taliban were in the stronghold in the southern province of Helmand and were contesting control in almost every province of the country, especially in the south and east. Taliban did capture part of the cities of capital cities of Kunduz, Ghazni, and Farah provinces, in the last ten years but could not hold for more than a few days and lost to US and Afghan forces. The US increased its troop strength despite the announcement of reduction by President Trump in 2017, altered its operational strategy, and started targeting the Taliban's financial sources alongside the fighters. The air bombing was conducted against poppy production areas to hurt the sustenance of the Taliban. Yet, the Taliban remained intact to pose a serious threat to the international and Afghan forces.

The peace agreement was inked between the US and Taliban in Doha in February 2020, which indicated that the US has finally accepted the Taliban as a political entity and an important segment of the Afghan solution. Though the agreement was signed, yet Taliban and the government forces continued to battle each other. Taliban did not stop attacks against the government and civilian targets. Intra-Afghan talks, the subsequent step of the process, stalled due to the Afghan government's response and even the US, which had to take certain steps before the initiation of talks. Indications were that the current year (2021) would witness an escalation in violence and insecurity, leading to the collapse of the peace process. The question raised is, what contributed to the unexpected and unprecedented resurgence of the Taliban? The US had high stakes in Afghan peace, preserving the political, security, and developmental progress, and gains were vital for a future course. Taliban had become more resilient, politically aware, and engaged internationally, therefore were a threat to US interests. Why did the US fail to overpower the Taliban over the past two decades? What made the Taliban so strong to contest and resist the numerically outnumbered, well-equipped, and technologically superior US and international forces, are the areas being discussed in the subsequent pages?

After two decades of war, the US closed the international combat mission in Afghanistan; the Taliban are now considered a threat to the country and the region. After having prevailed, the fear exists that the Taliban will harbor terrorist outfits having widespread violent ambitions and impair the country's economic, human, and social developments. Though the Taliban did not possess the military strength nor had the masses total support and influence to regain and sustain power in Afghanistan, when it was fighting, it posed a serious challenge to Kabul and Washington as the US was winding down up its decadeslong war in history. Taliban resilience raised a question about the ongoing state-building process that had cost Billions of international funding.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Global Conflict Tracker, "War in Afghanistan". Council on Foreign Relations, 2020.
<https://www.cfr.org/globalconflict-tracker/conflict/war-afghanistan>.

Afghan Government Capacity/ Governance

Internal Political Environment. In post-Taliban Afghanistan, governance was a serious problem. The system suffered from widespread corruption, the feeble rule of law, institutional weaknesses, compromised national and provincial governments, and a struggling economy dependent on foreign funding. The unbalanced population with a majority under 25 years of age, ethnic and sectarian conflicts, religious extremism, and personality-oriented politics worsened the governance at all tiers of the state and government. The global indexes indicated that the country stood at the lowest in corruption. Highly centralized governance and state structure damaged the state's popularity and the populace's trust in the leadership. Legitimacy, human rights violations, accountability mechanisms, transparency, the rule of law, and institutional weaknesses remained missing in the country's governance structure at all levels. The continued insurgency/ fighting, presence of foreign forces, and presence of non-state militant actors gravely affected the national security apparatus. In the past two decades, the political compromises at the highest levels made the political system subservient to the individuals rather than the intuitions. The US failed to transform the state institutions, especially the defense and security forces.

During their four terms, President Karzai and President Ghani repeatedly blamed others, particularly the external players, for the resurgence of the Taliban. Pakistan was severely criticized for supporting the Taliban. May it be a blame game between the two countries, Pakistan and Afghanistan, or the weakness of the Afghan state, for sure, the Taliban did enjoy some category of external support to re-emerge after the initial collapse. Karzai government lacked in many areas, which included the president's personality, his legitimacy, divide within the government of factionalism, favoritism in appointments, corruption at all tiers of the government, slow pace of developments due to corrupt practices, inept human development, and plodding progress in professionalizing police and armed forces. Drug production and a weak or dependent economy also contributed to weak governance.

Political Instability

Elections. In the post-Taliban period, the first Afghan election was held in October 2004 to install a politically elected head of the government, as Karzai was still the interim president selected under the Bonn Agreement. One year later, the parliamentary and provincial elections were held in September 2005. The exact sequence was repeated in 2009 and 2010 for presidential, parliamentary, and provincial councils. As per the Bonn Agreement of 2001, the establishment of an electoral system and institutions were the key functions following the US invasion and the removal of the Taliban from the government. All the elections, Presidential, Masharano jirga (the Senate), Wolesi Jirga (National Assembly), and the provincial, received criticism about fairness and transparency, both in conduct and results.³²

After two consecutive terms, the 2014 elections became controversial owing to Karzai's inability to contest the presidency due to term limits. During April 2014 presidential election, Ashraf Ghani, Abdullah Abdullah, and Zalami Rasul were the leading candidates. However, no one secured 50 percent votes, the majority votes required to become president, as per the constitution. The second round was held in June 2014 and was intensely criticized for election fraud. Over 3000 complaints of irregularities and violations were received. Ghani secured 56 percent during the second round, and Abdullah got 43 percent votes.³³ The result became controversial, and until September 2014, no announcement could be made. Finally, an extra-

³² Thomas H. Johnson "The Illusion of Afghanistan's Electoral Representative Democracy: The Cases of Afghan Presidential and National Legislative Elections", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, (2018) 29:1, p-2

³³ *Ibid*, p-1-37

constitutional arrangement was made with two heads of state, the President and the Chief Executive sharing the power; the arrangement was named the unity government.

The next Presidential elections were to be held in 2018, however, they were delayed for three months, initially scheduled in April 2019.³⁴ Again, in March 2019, the elections were postponed, and no new dates were announced, stated reason was the voting process. Finally, on 28 September 2019, the long-awaited polls were held. The voter turnout was the lowest recorded in the recently held elections since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001. Both top runners Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah claimed victory resulting in an almost six months stalemate. The results were not announced and were delayed due to alleged irregularities, rigging, fraud, technical problems of voting count in biometrics, and security issues. In December 2019, the IEC announced preliminary results, with Ghani obtaining 50.64 percent and Abdullah Abdullah getting 39.52 percent of the polled votes. Final results were declared in February 2020, confirming the initial results. Ashraf Ghani was declared the winner. Abdullah Abdullah rejected the IEC results and declared himself the winner and announced forming his government and, in subsequent time, started appointing his governors for different provinces. On 9 March 2020, two inauguration ceremonies of oath-taking were conducted by Ghani and Abdullah separately. The tension and political instability prevailed for months. Once again, steps had to be taken beyond the constitution to accommodate both contenders to end the stalemate, and the power-sharing formula was incorporated. Ghani was made President, and Abdullah, head of the High Council with executive powers and authority, even allowing a 50 % share in the cabinet.³⁵

The Unity Government formula had contributed towards political polarization and continued tension in earlier terms, and the same tried again. The election outcome further intensified the divide between the communities and political groups. The political standoff of months between the top runners indicated the political instability that existed and continued to prevail. The instability seriously damaged the peace process and insecurity. The global organs and powers have been expressing disappointment over the failures of Afghan leaders to compromise and their response to the national crisis. The political impasse in the 2014 and 2019 elections, which led to extra-constitutional arrangements, affected the peace process, and the crises contributed towards insecurity in Afghanistan.

Ali Yawar Adili's words amply qualify the political situation in the aftermath of recent Presidential elections: "He concludes that the impasse is broken, with the new institutions designed – in theory – to accommodate all major political forces in the country. However, undefined provisions regarding the structure of these institutions might prove contentious and lead to renewed conflict, while power politics and factional rivalry will likely continue to undermine governance and the peace process".³⁶

The imposed democracy efforts by the international community, especially by the US through regular elections, yielded positive in the context of voting and electioneering only. Still, the process contributed to political instability and continued political corruption. The two elections that Karzai won were criticized for malpractice and resulted in political polarization and weak governance. The "Unity Government" arrangements also contributed to further political divide in the country and a tug-of-war-like situation in

³⁴ Colin Cookman. "Assessing Afghanistan's 2019 Presidential Election." <https://www.usip.org>. August. 2020. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/pw_166-assessing_afghanistans_2019_presidential_electionpw.pdf.

³⁵ European Asylum Support Office. "Afghanistan State Structures and Security Forces: Country of Origin Information Report." LU: Publications Office, 2020. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2847/115002>.

³⁶ Ali Yawar Adili, Afghanistan Analysts Network, "End of the Post-Election Impasse? Ghani and Abdullah's New Power-Sharing Formula." Document #2031009, May 20, 2020. <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2031009.html>.

Kabul. This vested political arrangement since 2004 has jeopardized political development, institutional strengthening, economic stability, and the fight against the Taliban.

Factionalism and Key Appointment Holders

Mr. Karzai as president, proved to be a weak and unsuccessful head of the state and even administrator. The factionally selected cabinet was beyond control and made the decision-making process difficult. Karzai lacked decisiveness and could not control factionalism from within the cabinet, which he inherited from Bonn conference verdicts and even his appointees. Under the Bonn process, 2002, the interim government was created, which consisted of two groups, the former Mujahideen predominantly Northern Alliance and abroad-based Afghan technocrats, who had lived in exile and worked for the NGOs and native governments. His appointees were primarily from the same elite. These two groups could not cope with each other owing to their socio-economic-political and cultural understanding and backgrounds. They held the position of influence, strength, and executive. Still, both groups flailed to move along from the outset and contributed negatively toward government efficacy during the initial and subsequent years.

Interestingly, the two groups consisted of different ethnic entities. Mujahideen, or the warlords, were primarily non-Pashtun, and the technocrats were predominantly Pashtun.³⁷ This ethnic diversity became another weakness for the Karzai government and became ethnic friction. Any rectification within the cabinet would lead to criticism and would get interpreted as anti-mujahideen, thereby leading to tension and a trust deficit. Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special envoy for Afghanistan, and Karzai were Pashtun, and their steps towards balance creation would be taken as marginalizing the non-Pashtun. Even the appointments of governors and district heads led to controversies and became a problem. The ministers and governors handled the official affairs like fiefdoms and could not be changed owing to political, ethnic, and tribal orientation and pressures for Karzai. This phenomenon of the weakness of the head of the state, besides cabinet performance, also contributed to the legitimacy of the government; above all, the fight against the Taliban got significant distractions.³⁸

The Legitimacy Issue

Hamid Karzai was not a well-known personality except in the Southern Pashtun belt and amongst the refugees till his appointment as chairman of the interim setup in 2002. The western media, especially the US and British, ran a vast publicity campaign to make him known in Afghanistan. With his victory in the first Afghan election securing 54 percent vote, the perception was built of Karzai's popularity and legitimacy, but it did not last long. It was interpreted through public participation in the parliamentary election in 2005, where 50 percent voted (turnout) compared to 75 percent in the presidential election. The first presidential election generated widespread enthusiasm but remained doubtful on account of the results to be pre-determined for Karzai. The election's importance was not the president's selection but served as the de facto referendum for the legitimacy of the Bonn process and its endorsement. The backing out of the major candidate's week before the election date and asking supporters to vote for Karzai also strengthen the doubt of legitimacy.³⁹

³⁷ Najibullah Lafraie, "Resurgence of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan: How and why?" *International Politics* 46(1):102-113 (2009). <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2008.36>

³⁸ Antonio. Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001-2018*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

³⁹ Scott Seward Smith. "The 2004 Presidential Elections." *The Afghan Analysts Network*, 2012, 5. ¹⁵⁰
Carlotta Gall, "Afghans Lack \$10 Billion in Aid, Report Says." *The New York Times*, March 26, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/26/world/asia/26afghan.html>.

The rise in insecurity, due to Taliban militancy, especially in southern and eastern parts of the country during 2005-07, raised questions about the popularity and acceptance of the sitting regime. The marginalization of Pashtun and hoping to get widespread acceptance by other ethnic groups were also perceived. In reality, the important ministries like interior, foreign, NDS, defense, and second-tier appointments rested with non-Pashtun.

Reconstruction and Development

In the context of the reconstruction of war-torn Afghanistan and the developmental / job creation projects, the international community was portrayed with a high-ended projection. In contrast, in reality, there are very few successes. Afghan populace tied high expectations with the new government after the fall of the Taliban, but the global promises turned to dismal disappointments. There were a series of problems; the amount pledged was far less than required for the speedy reconstruction. Initial reconstruction estimates were 30 billion, but in 2008, the Afghan government requested 50 billion for the 5-year developmental plan. Another concern was that all the pledges were not met. By early 2008, in six years, the pledges made were around 25 billion, but only 10 billion were distributed, and the significant shortfall was from the US government.¹⁵⁰ The reconstruction, therefore, got setbacks, and the Afghan government's efficacy was questioned in turn.

Another grey area in pledges was the methodology. A large portion of the pledged amount was going to advisors and experts, in the shape of salaries, around 40 percent, according to ACBAR (Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief). The massive overheads by aid agencies like the UN and NGOs was another siphon out of the aid pledges. Transparency in disbursement and selection of projects was another factor that hindered the reconstruction, thereby the government getting blamed. NGOs were criticized for rampant corruption. A small amount was spent on the projects, and a major portion was spent on overheads and corruption.

The failure in development and reconstruction resulted in enhanced poverty and unemployment. As per Afghanistan Human Development Report 2007, Afghanistan ranked 174 out of 178 countries in global human development. Afghanistan Human Development Report (AHDR) is a composite indicator that trails educational and economic performance.⁴⁰ Some other reports have also indicated the misapplication of foreign assistance funds and free-market monetary policy, which has contributed to societal inequality. All these have, along with rampant corruption at all tiers of the government, caused damage to the government's performance, legitimacy, and the fight against insurgency.

Rule of Law

The rule of law and security are two critical factors for assessing governance. In the case of Afghanistan, restoration of both was and is essential in a transition phase. The better-performing countries show an upward trend in implementation and restoration. In contrast, Afghanistan, since the removal of the Taliban government in 2001, initially showed an improvement but went down in restoring law and order and security in later years. The table below indicates the poor performance of Afghanistan in the rule of law over the period. According to the world bank, which underlines the importance of the rule of law, the focus is on

⁴⁰ Center for Policy and Human Development, 2008, "Afghanistan Human Development Report 2007."
<http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/nhdr2007.pdf>.

strengthening the institutions and governance to provide justice, employment, and security to get the state out of violence and fragility.⁴¹

Afghanistan is governed through the presidential form of the democratic system. After Karzai's tenure, a new form of government was established called Unity Government in 2014 and again in 2020. This system comprises the President and the chief executive, an extra-constitutional arrangement that negates article 61 of the constitution.¹⁵³ Both NUG were installed after months of deadlock. The stalemate ended through US efforts though the US also made a compromise that suited its interests. Afghans looked at the parliament as corrupt and partisan. Unluckily when the parliament deposed the ministers for corruption, it was taken as a weakening of the government. The president appoints the cabinet without the approval of the parliament. In a recent NUG scenario, two heads of state shared the powers, and appointments were also shared. Though the balance of power favored Ghani, Abdullah still held sway in many areas.

The Afghan constitution clearly defines the judiciary's role; the system is organized in a higher court with eight justices and related departments. Lower courts are dealing with varying issues. Judiciary has not been able to subject power to the state in the context of the rule of law. The system lacks populace trust due to corruption and slow dispensation. Transparency in the decisions further undermined the judiciary. This contributed to the populace turning to the Taliban's judicial system, the Sharia Courts, where a fasttrack decision-making process was widespread. Taliban judicial process is low in expenses, speedy, and transparent, according to observers.

In Afghanistan, the informal justice system has been in practice, especially at the local level. However, the judiciary is an independent body, according to the constitution, that includes all courts. But due to the structural problems and deficiencies in the context of policy-making and professionals, the judiciary was considered overburdened. This made the institution corrupt and inefficient and lost the public's trust. According to the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) 2020 report, more than 45 percent of Afghans prefer the traditional jirga system over the state judicial courts to resolve disputes and issues. The jirga system is considered more effective and trustworthy due to early and efficient resolution. Though the government made efforts, the security situation did not permit the efficient handling of the matter. Shortage of the primary courts at a lower level also permitted space for the Taliban jirga system. This also offered the Taliban an influencing platform against the clumsy rule of law.

The post-Taliban politically elected governments have relied on the existing power structure of Mujideen commanders and warlords to accrue power and legitimacy and to avoid strong opposition. This resulted in political compromises and a nexus between the power lords and the sitting regimes. Resultantly the administrative, security, and even judicial structure got compromised. According to Asia Foundation survey,⁴² more than 70 percent of Afghan think that corruption is the central problem and that the corrupt

⁴¹ Richard Hogg & Claudia Nassif & Camilo Gomez Osorio & William Byrd & Andrew Beath, "Afghanistan in Transition: Looking beyond 2014," World Bank Publications, The World Bank, number 13107, November. 2013.

¹⁵³ "Forging Afghanistan's National Unity Government." 2015. <https://www.usip.org>. United States Institute of Peace. January. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB183-Forging-Afghanistans-National-UnityGovernment.pdf>.

⁴² Rep. "Afghanistan in 2018, A Survey of the Afghan People". The Asia Foundation, 2018. https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2018_Afghan-Survey_fullReport-12.4.18.pdf. p-116 ¹⁵⁵ Dr. Ellinor. Zeino, "Peace versus Democracy? Afghanistan between Government Crisis and a US. Peace Deal with the Taliban." 2020. <https://pajhwok.com/2020/04/06/peaceversus-democracy-afghanistan-between-government-crisis-and-a-u-s-peace-deal-with-the-taliban/>.

are rarely punished. Afghanistan requires an independent and effective prosecution mechanism to handle office abuse. This has adversely affected the populace's trust in government and state institutions.

Having become a democracy under the US and other international forces' occupation since 2001, Afghanistan could not attain the minimum governance standards. This all was due to rampant corruption within the government and institutions, high rate of unemployment, ongoing insurgency or insecurity, human rights violations, economic capacity, absence of the rule of law, and lack of institutional and administrative reforms. Afghanistan has not only failed in good governance but has also failed in politics, with a high degree of political compromises and corruption. The government was dependent on foreign aid for functioning. The US granted financial assistance, global donations, and grants for lifelines for economic sustenance. The political system, governance, institutions, and security apparatus remained dysfunctional and weak. According to Dr Ellinor Zeino, "Executive and legislative powers have been, at times, overstretched or misused against each other. At times, the government sidelined the parliament or ignored legislative decisions. Besides, parliament members did not hesitate to misuse their legislative oversight powers such as no-confidence votes or the right to impeach government ministers for their own retaliatory or individual purpose."¹⁵⁵

The political environment in Afghanistan over the past two decades dictates that the regimes could not develop a sustainable governance mechanism, nor the institutional capacity could be enhanced to a level where the regime could contest the insurgency. The political compromises, functional anomalies in statecraft, fraudulent repeated elections, and corrupt political leadership/practices contributed to weak regimes that could not make conclusive decisions in the context of the insurgency. Taliban took advantage of this weak regime and governance and emerged as political cum militant entity over the years.

Satisfaction Table with Government Performance, percent who say "very good job" or "somewhat good job" (2007-2019)

Year	National Government	Unity	Provincial Government	Municipal Authorities (Urban)	Municipal Authorities (Rural)
2007	80%		79%	58%	N/A
2008	68%		74%	50%	67%
2009	71%		75%	58%	69%
2010	73%		78%	53%	61%
2011	73%		80%	63%	68%
2012	75%		80%	65%	66%
2013	74%		68%	57%	63%
2014	75%		68%	57%	58%
2015	58%		57%	47%	53%
2016	49%		53%	42%	51%
2017	56%		57%	47%	56%
2018	59%		61%	52%	54%
2019	66%		64%	60%	59%

Courtesy: AFGHANISTAN INDEX, Tracking variables of reconstruction and security in post-9/11 Afghanistan.⁴³

Afghan State Capacity - Security Apparatus

Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), ANA, and ANP. After deposing the Taliban, the international community believed that instead of a national army, Afghanistan might work with an auxiliary force. But the policy change was later made, and a national army became a reality. By 2008, the national army had around 76,000 officers and soldiers, but owing to its capacity, it did not assume the role of fighting the Taliban for many years. In 2008 it was reported by ISAF that the Afghan army conducted its first-ever artillery live-fire practice.⁴⁴ This indicates the slow pace of the capacity building of the Afghan army, which later had to take the operational responsibilities. Capacity building was the central issue right from the beginning, provision of military equipment, especially artillery and aircraft, remained a concern. During the initial years of GWoT, the US primary focus was on counter-terrorism, capacity building was not a priority, and funding remained low. However, during President Obama's second term, the funding was increased to 6 billion \$ per year, which improved the training and material provision. On the other hand, establishing an effective police force was an even bigger challenge and worse than the army. The progress was alarmingly slow, which seriously affected institution-building alongside the law-and-order situation control, the fight against insurgency, and the government's efficacy. Police, like the army, also had issues like corruption, inefficiency, brutalities, discipline, and extrajudicial killings. Other factors that contributed to institutional performance were nepotism, favoritism, and warlords' loyalists' induction into the force.

Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) comprised the national army (including air force, border force, territorial army, and civil defense force), national police, and the National Directorate of Security (NDS). The authorized force level was 382,000—the Ministry of Defense with 227,103 personnel, the Ministry of Interior with 154,626, including 30,000 local Afghan police.⁴⁵ But as of 2019, around 273,000 personnel were biometrically enrolled, excluding around 20,000 Afghan Local Police (ALP).

Having dislodged the Taliban government, the US prioritized building a new security apparatus in Afghanistan, but corruption, desertion, and low motivation levels seriously affected the process. In 2007 Afghan government initiated four years roadmap to rationalize and modernize the ANSF to ensure control over the population centers attempting to tackle leadership issues, resource management, and corruption. This was tried by increasing the force levels of special forces, airpower enhancement, and taking police away from combat zone to policing duties in the civil sector. Though the outcome remained discouraging, the US signed an agreement with the Afghan government, under which the US affirmed that the existing commitments for the provision of funds every year for training, advising, sustaining, and providing equipment to the ANSF would continue so that the defense and security of Afghanistan could be managed independently by the government against internal and external threats.¹⁵⁹

⁴³ Sam Gollob, Michael E. O'Hanlon. "Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post9/11 Afghanistan," Foreign Policy at Brookings, August 2020, 49.

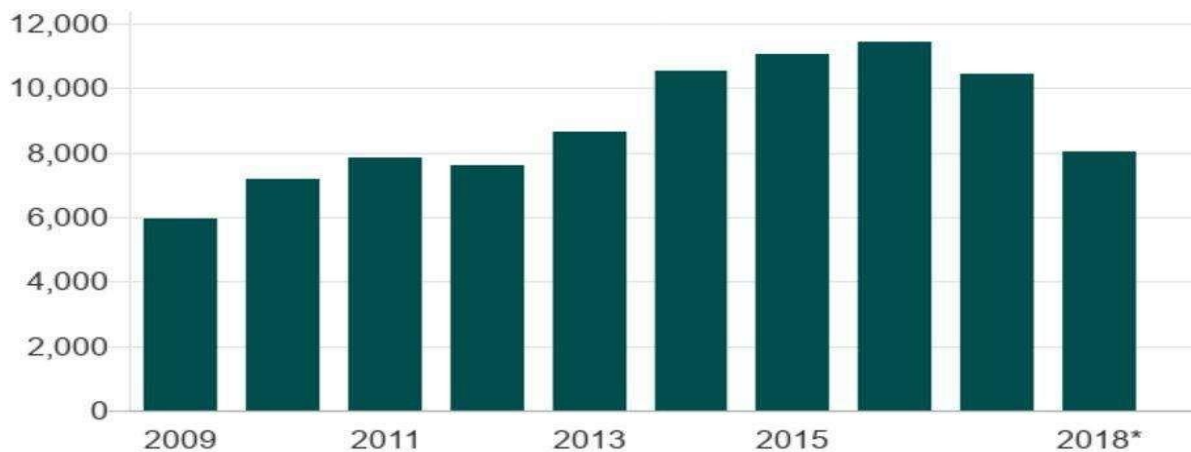
⁴⁴ European Asylum Support Office. "Afghanistan State Structures and Security Forces: Country of Origin Information Report". LU: Publications Office, 2020. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2847/115002>.

⁴⁵ European Asylum Support Office. "Afghanistan State Structures and Security Forces: Country of Origin Information Report". LU: Publications Office, 2020. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2847/115002>. ¹⁵⁹ SIGAR Quarterly Report, "Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction SIGAR." April 30, 2020, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-04-30qr.pdf>. p-105

As per the statement of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, more than 45000 Afghan security persons have lost their lives since 2014.⁴⁶ At the same time, UN Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA) showed concern about the civilian deaths during search operations by the ANSF.⁴⁷ At times the ANSF committed atrocities by killing civilians retaliating against Taliban attacks. Child recruitment by ANSF remained another concern besides asexual abuse.

Total civilian casualties in Afghanistan

Deaths and injuries



Source: UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. (*2018 casualties to 30 Sep)

BBC

Afghan National Army (ANA)

As per the constitution, the Afghan National Army (ANA) operates under the responsibility of the Ministry of Defense (MoD) and is part of the Armed Forces of Afghanistan. In April 2018, President Ghani announced the establishment of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force (ANA-TF). The goal was to create a local security force that is more effective, professional, sustainable, and led by MoD. Contrary to the ALP, the MoD was to command and control and locally recruit but nationally trained ANA-TF personnel. Each company (Tolai) recruited soldiers from a particular district, led by officers from outside that district, already serving in the regular ANA or being in the ANA reserves. The ANA-TF strength was aimed to be 36000 personnel. The ANA-TF was set to reach 10,000 men and be mobilized across districts in 32 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces by 2020. The Afghan Air Force (AAF), the primary air organ for the ANA ground forces, provides aerial fire and lift support to ground forces across Afghanistan with their headquarters in Kabul. As USDOD noted, human capital limitations were one of the most significant challenges that AAF had to face, with only a limited number of Afghans meeting the needed qualifications.⁴⁸

Mandate and Structure

National Army constitutionally is the guardian of the country's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence. The general staff of the ANA commands all ground and air forces, including ANA

⁴⁶ BBC News, "Afghanistan's Ghani Says 45,000 Security Personnel Killed since 2014." BBC, January 25, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47005558>.

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ European Asylum Support Office. "Afghanistan State Structures and Security Forces: Country of Origin Information Report". LU: Publications Office, 2020. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2847/115002>.

conventional force, the Afghan air force, the special mission wing, the army special operations command, the national civil order force, and the border force.

ANA comprises five regional commands (corps), composed of Kandak (Headquarters), three to four brigades, and specialist brigades, with around 24,000 personnel. The regional commands were stationed throughout the country with provincial boundaries and geographic regions, like Kandahar (205 corps), Herat (Herat 207 corps), Mazar e Sharif (209 corps), Kabul (201 corps), and Gardez (203 corps)⁴⁹. Recruitment for the soldiers was done voluntarily for an initial three years, with ages between 18 to 35 years.⁵⁰

Capacity and Effectiveness

The security situation in Afghanistan has been a mix of high volatility and relative improvements during the entire two decades. Taliban and other militant outfits remained and threatened security and peace seriously. Afghan national army was of some priority during the initial period; however, for several reasons, the institution could not be developed to the desired operational levels and remained efficient enough to take total responsibility for fighting the insurgency.

NATO-led resolute support mission was responsible for training, capacity building, advice, and assistance to ANA. By 2019, ANA enrolled strength was 162,000 troops, while according to SIGAR January 2020 report, the total strength was 182,000, and the authorized strength was 228,000 as per US DoD.⁵¹ The increasing number of operational losses was one of the causes that ANA's authorized recruitment strength could not get completed. The other was a high number of desertion and absence without leave. In December 2019, ANA reported that absence without leave is a serious concern for the institution.⁵² The Afghan MoD also was believed to be running low on logistics; the supply of equipment and other stocks was also a challenge due to the insurgency and the insecurity of the route to the southern and eastern provinces.

Therefore, ANA lacked offensive capability and primarily adapted to the defensive mode of operations. In rural territories especially, ANSF remained on the defensive and could not hold territories recaptured from the Taliban for an extended period owing to Taliban counter-attacks. This all was due to the capacity problems in manpower and equipment. Another reason for defensive deployment was that the US spearheaded all the operations in the past two decades, and Afghan forces were primarily used as a backup.

Integrity Assessment

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), which oversaw the reconstruction in the country, was established in 2008 by the US government.⁵³ According to the SIGAR quarterly report of 2019, the strength management and payroll system followed by the MoD in Afghanistan provided opportunities for corruption and mal practices. There have been ghost soldiers, payrolls, and payments for many years. SIGAR investigators unearthed that government officials, both at central and provincial police

⁴⁹ "Summary of Afghan National Army (ANA) - Naval Postgraduate School." <https://www.nps.edu/>. Accessed November 19, 2022.

<https://www.nps.edu/documents/105988371/107571254/Afghan%20National%20Army%20Summary.pdf/66246d93-15c0-4945-a4db-0f6d5d318f81>.

⁵⁰ European Asylum Support Office. "Afghanistan State Structures and Security Forces: Country of Origin Information Report". LU: Publications Office, 2020. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2847/115002>.

⁵¹ Department of Defense the USA, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan 2019." [media.defense.gov](https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jan/23/2002238296/-1/-1/1/1225-REPORT-DECEMBER-2019.PDF), 2020. <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jan/23/2002238296/-1/-1/1/1225-REPORT-DECEMBER-2019.PDF>. p-49

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ "Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)." 2021. About Sigar. Accessed August 19. <https://www.sigar.mil/about/>.

and military headquarters throughout the country, made fake payroll records and were receiving payments against non-existent employees. However, MoD and MoI rejected the claims.⁵⁴ Another alarming phenomenon during the initial days of the Karzai tenure was the theft and selling of arms and ammunition by the police and military soldiers.⁵⁵ At times these were found in the hands of the Taliban and other outlaws or sold in open markets.

Violations by ANA

Human rights violations by the state organs, especially the police, were a common phenomenon, and Afghans are otherwise famous for brutalities against opponents and enemies. During wars, this attitude gets multiplied as the law enforcement agencies in the garb of law enforcers commit atrocities and excesses. Only in 2019, according to UNAMA, over one thousand civilian casualties occurred, mainly by the Afghan military and the air force, with around 400 deaths and 700 injuries.⁵⁶ Air bombings resulted in deaths to the civil populace, which repeatedly happened; one of the most criticized was in Imam Sahib, Kunduz, in northern Afghanistan, where 11 civilians were killed. ANA's long-range artillery bombing and mortar shelling also resulted in civilian casualties.

Forced disappearances, deaths during detention, arbitrary detention, and torture by state agencies was other serious concern and violation that attracted criticism and lowered the government's popularity. As per the UNAMA report⁵⁷ in two years (2017-2018), dozens of ANA detainees were interviewed who accepted excesses, and 36 percent reported torture, ill-treatment, sexual harassment of young boys, and severe beating during detention.

Afghan National Police (ANP)

ANP is under the responsibilities of the Ministry of Interior in the civil sector, mandated to maintain the law-and-order situation of the country, maintain civil order, check on corruption, anti-narcotics duties, community and individual security, and guard freedom and rights according to the constitution.

Capacity and Effectiveness

SIGAR's April 2020 report states that ANP has 91000 personnel, whereas the US DoD reported the strength to be 124000 in 2019.⁵⁸ Attrition was the main problem confronted by the Afghan police, and that was due to the prolonged employment in remote areas with the least fighting equipment, low-quality training, challenging living environments, and constant attacks by the Taliban. Other contributing factors to the high attrition rate were desertions and the dispersed static checkpoints across the country, making them vulnerable to Taliban and other insurgent attacks. Till July 2019, around 6500 posts were closed due to desertion and to avoid losses.⁵⁹ Corruption in the force was also adding to the effectiveness. SIGAR report

⁵⁴ SIGAR Quarterly Report, "Special Inspector General for SIGAR Afghanistan Reconstruction OCT 30 2019." [sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports, 2020. https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-10-30qr.pdf](https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-10-30qr.pdf). p-83

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ European Asylum Support Office. "Afghanistan State Structures and Security Forces: Country of Origin Information Report". LU: Publications Office, 2020. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2847/115002>.

⁵⁷ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Rep. "Treatment of Conflict-Related Detainees in Afghanistan: Preventing Torture and Ill-Treatment under the Anti-Torture Law." <https://unama.unmissions.org>, 2020. p 12-21

⁵⁸ European Asylum Support Office. "Afghanistan State Structures and Security Forces: Country of Origin Information Report." LU: Publications Office, 2020. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2847/115002>.

⁵⁹ European Asylum Support Office. "Afghanistan State Structures and Security Forces: Country of Origin Information Report." LU: Publications Office, 2020. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2847/115002>.

also indicated that a large number of check posts had to be closed due to the extortion reports from the trucks plying on Kabul Kandahar Road.⁶⁰

Afghan national and local police forces were criticized by the populace in the countryside, and the force received limited support from them. The problem with police reforms was, a lack of para-military capabilities, local government support, and the rule of law were some of the problems being faced by the police force. The more serious were corruption, extortion due to low income, loyalties to warlords and political affiliates, narcotics, and accommodation with the Taliban. Field duties were less manned, and the majority stayed in headquarters. Therefore, the rural areas and outskirts were dominated and controlled by the Taliban.

Integrity

Police remained focused on their primary role of first-line force as a defense against the insurgents in urban and administrative centers. But were involved in corruption and even organized crime, especially the smuggling on key routes.⁶¹ There have been reports about police corruption in contract awarding, food, fuel, and taking bribes from hotels, on highways, and even shops. According to the “European Asylum Support Office,” the Afghan police were the most hated government organ in Afghan society and were taken as ‘predatory bandits’ due to their corrupt practices.⁶² Another alarming problem with police and even with ANA was desertion along with official weapons and ammunition. Police were also alleged of setting up private check posts to extort money. All this resulted in losing populace trust and the force’s efficacy in fighting the main problem of insurgency in urban centers.

Analysis

Right from the outset, the US and its allies, under the UN and NATO, in Bonn decided to establish and train effective new security and defense forces for the new Afghan government to provide a good security base to the country that could sustain the security challenges after their exit from Afghanistan.⁶³ However, despite staying in Afghanistan for two decades, the US and the UN failed to meet the military and security institution-building goals. The other shortfalls in the same context are the levels of governance and the rule of law, which indirectly affected the security and fighting insurgency. ANSF never became an effective fighting and defense force to contest and even fight the Taliban and other insurgent groups independently. The successive political government’s inability to impact the power brokers, criminal networks, drugs, and corruption within and around ANSF gravely contributed to continued insecurity throughout the US presence in Afghanistan. The US and its partners, who were to train the ANSF, also failed in funding and making the required number of trainers available. The rise in ANSF goals, increase in numbers, compatible salaries, training in a short time to compete with the Taliban, and the motivation to fight own nationals could not be met. The Afghan defense and security forces struggled throughout to become potent enough to defend themselves against the Taliban without good support from the US forces. Therefore, one of the primary

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Freedom House, “Afghanistan: Freedom in the World 2020 Country Report.” 2020. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/afghanistan/freedom-world/2020>.

⁶² European Asylum Support Office. “Afghanistan State Structures and Security Forces: Country of Origin Information Report.” LU: Publications Office, 2020. <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2847/115002>.

⁶³ Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University “Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the ReEstablishment of Permanent Government Institutions.”, 2002. https://doi.org/10.29171/azu_acku_pamphlet_hv555_a3_a444_2002.

factors of the prolonged insurgency and resurgence of the Taliban was the state's inability to develop a formidable security apparatus.

US Diversion to Iraq

According to Bob Woodward, "Bush at War" (2002), the CIA, during the discussion of invasion options for Afghanistan, the general rule applied was that do the opposite of what the Soviets did in 1979 in Afghanistan.⁶⁴ Soviets had committed large contingents of troops, and the US went for the light footprint option and relied on special forces operations, aerial bombardment, intelligence-based operations, and used anti-Taliban groups. The light footprint strategy was with the anxiety of not repeating the Soviet's follies. The need for troops in Iraq was also at the back of the mind or already decided. The initial deployment of ISAF troops also remained low until 2006, despite the Afghan government's request to raise the troops' levels. Whether deployment of large forces was intended, desirable and feasible; nevertheless, there is no doubt that the lack of professional forces in Afghanistan at the initial stages contributed to the resurgence of the Taliban in later years.⁶⁵

In just two years after the invasion of Afghanistan, Iraq became another war sector for the US. The American troops in Afghanistan were only 7,900, with the view to present a "light footprint" in that country, fearing the Soviet fate of 1979. Whereas the invasion of Iraq was with around 130,000 American troops beside NATO forces. Most of the coalition nations refused to send more troops to Afghanistan due to their disagreement with the US over the invasion of Iraq.

The failure of the US in Afghanistan is also attributed to the US war on Iraq by commentators and critics. The diversion of intelligence efforts, military and air forces, and reconstruction resources from Afghanistan to Iraq gravely affected the war efforts of Operation Enduring Freedom. Another point of interest is that the war in Iraq and the rise in violence and fighting by the Taliban in Afghanistan even overshadowed the US Presidential campaign in 2004. Taliban in 2001 were defeated in less than ten weeks, and the Afghans showed no sign of rising against the invading foreign forces. Yet, the US could not consolidate on initial gains and diverted its efforts to Iraq, which resulted in the longest American war of two decades.

The collation forces that were to make available, the arms, trainers, advisers, and financial aid, were too little, slow, and inefficient when the US diverted her effort to Iraq.⁶⁶ The American strategy of light footprint in the initial stage of the invasion and till 2004 was inadequate for the impending task and faulty to overpower the threat. Though, according to ground realities, the Allied forces did manage to capture Kabul and other important cities all over Afghanistan, but the alliance was not successful in structuring the capacity of Afghan defense and security forces right from the beginning. The training of police was the responsibility of Germany and later the US, but till 2010, the force lacked in all spheres, especially trainers and advisors. The inefficient police were the grey area in the security chain, the Taliban took advantage, and ANP became their priority target. During 2007-2009 around 3000 Afghan security persons were killed, and the majority were police officials.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Bob Woodward. Bush at War. 2008. London: Simon & Schuster.

⁶⁵ Najibullah Lafraie, "Resurgence of the Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan: How and Why?" International Politics 46, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 102–13. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2008.36>.

⁶⁶ Joseph J. Collins, Understanding War in Afghanistan. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2011. p-72-80

⁶⁷ Joseph J. Collins, Understanding War in Afghanistan. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2011. p-72-80

Operation Enduring Freedom became a nightmare of contractor phenomenon, with more contractor manpower than soldiers as more troops were diverted to Iraq and Afghanistan became the secondary objective. Another cause of the protracted Afghan conflict was the contractor or volunteer force. Until 2009, the Afghan security forces (ANSF) remained inefficient and were nowhere near the capacity to take responsibility. The prime reason was the failure of the coalition forces to train and enhance the forces' capacity; the coalition partners even refused to assist after the US invasion of Iraq. The shortage of forces could be felt during the coalition offensive operations as they resembled whack-a-mole activity. The coalition forces would capture Taliban-occupied areas, and the Taliban would go in-hiding later, reoccupying the same area after the coalition forces' departure. This phenomenon was persistent and predominant in rural areas as the coalition forces focused on the Urban centers. The shortage of forces could be visibly observed as coalition forces were not consolidating their gains and occupying the success for a long period.

Although the US still contests that invasion of Iraq did not strip Afghanistan of what was required to overpower or eliminate the Taliban completely, the reality is that in the initial three years, till 2004, Afghanistan was relatively safe and secure. By 2004, the intelligence, surveillance, and special forces units were transferred to Iraq as that had become a priority. The assets needed in Afghanistan to continue and consolidate the successes were diverted even before 2004, as by then, the invasion of Iraq was in the final stages of planning. It's a fair assessment that by 2005, the security situation in Afghanistan started to decline as Iraq had become an increased and intense problem for the US compared to Afghanistan. Therefore, the US could not divert funds and additional troops to Afghanistan. The policy or strategic failure for the US was that while US luck declined in both wars, the state could not enhance the strength of the force to fight both wars till 2006. The table below indicates the troop levels during the years.

The US and coalition forces troop levels in Afghanistan⁶⁸

Year	US troops	other troops	Year	US troops	other troops
2001	2,500	N/A	2011	90,000	41,300
2002	9,700	4,800	2012	68,000	37,900
2003	13,100	5,000	2013	60,000	27,100
2004	16,700	7,700	2014	29,000	15,500
2005	17,800	8,900	2015	6,900	6,700
2006	22,100	16,200	2016	7,000	5,900
2007	24,700	24,500	2017	14,000	6,400
2008	31,800	29,700	2018	14,000	7,600

⁶⁸ Sam Gollob, Michael E. O'Hanlon. "Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post9/11 Afghanistan," Foreign Policy at Brookings, August 2020, p-5.

2009	68,000	33,800	2019	8,500	8,100
2010	90,000	40,500			

Funding of the desired or required quantum was another factor that the Iraq war overshadowed Afghanistan. According to Ambassador Ronald E. Neumann, the embassy requested additional funds of 600 million \$ in 2005 for development and support, but the state department initially reduced the figure and later only provided 32 million \$. The drastic cut in funds indicates insufficient support for the Afghan war, while the insecurity was rising and the US effort needed additional resources. The ambassador believed that the US engagement in Iraq drove the decision to this drastic cut.⁶⁹

By the end of the Bush tenure in 2008, security in Afghanistan had deteriorated to challenging levels, and the Afghan optimism about the future of Afghanistan too had gone down. The Afghan nation's confidence in the US was also declining by 2008, owing to the ever-growing Taliban strength since 2004 and the Afghan government's inefficiencies. Throughout the US war on Iraq, things were trying in Afghanistan, and Iraq kept the US leadership over-engaged, thereby losing focus on the conflict becoming protracted. It was not till the situation tilted in the US favor in Iraq that Afghanistan regained the US attention. Still, by then, the situation had gotten worst and Taliban had regained confidence, and their territorial control had increased. With Obama coming into power, Iraq's situation improved and Afghanistan became a priority again. By 2010 the troop levels in Afghanistan had increased more than two folds to Iraq, but the war against the Taliban had become difficult and tiring. Taliban were recruiting soldiers from the vast pool of unemployed youth, tribesmen, and former militia. They had gained expertise in guerilla and terror fighting. By 2009 Taliban insurgency had out-spread from the Pashtun base in the south (Kandahar) to the east and the entire country.

External Support to Taliban

The most crucial factor that determines the success of insurgency is the external support of insurgents. The ability to gain external support determines the fate of insurgency. It has been proved through historical records that insurgencies with support from external states are more successful than those with support from non-state actors and diaspora. The insurgencies that do not have external support have mostly failed.⁷⁰ Therefore, support from the state or non-state actors is essential and makes a clear difference. External support is of two categories, first is direct assistance in the form of finance, training, arms and equipment, operational support, shelter, fighters, and diplomatic backing. The second type is the use of foreign territory as a sanctuary. However, this depends on the type of external government, a weak government is more suitable for this type two support.

No insurgency can survive without external support, and Afghanistan is no exception. Whether the mujahideen struggle against the Soviets or the American war against the Taliban, the fighters/ insurgents had good support bases across the border in Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia. In the case of the Soviet war, the entire anti-Soviet global community supported mujahideen in fighting the red army. In the case of recent GWoT, however, the support base was only from the anti-American nations. Afghanistan is bordered by

⁶⁹ Joseph J. Collins, *Understanding War in Afghanistan*. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2011. p-72-80

⁷⁰ Seth G. Jones, "Insurgents and Their Support Network." *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: RAND Counterinsurgency Study--Volume 4*, 37-66. Santa Monica, CA; Arlington, VA; Pittsburgh, PA: RAND Corporation, 2008. P-12. Accessed April 23, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg595osd>.

countries that have remained involved in its internal affairs owing to the strategic compulsions and great powers' involvement in the region. Pakistan, the eastern neighbor, remained deeply involved in Afghan affairs since its creation. Pakistan's support to mujahideen at the behest of the US, being a US ally against the Soviet forces, was unprecedented, and the legacy remains. Support for the Taliban is yet another factor that Pakistan remains involved in Afghan affairs thorough out. Iran also supported mujahideen against the Soviets; however, in the recent US war, it covertly supported the Taliban.⁷¹ China and Russia, competitors to the US, are alleged to have supported the Taliban in their fight against the US. In the preceding paras, the external support to the Taliban is discussed as to how the external support was instrumental in Taliban re-emergence.

Pakistan

Pakistan is the most affected regional state due to the Afghan conflict and, in return, has influenced Afghan politics to vary degrees. The past four decades of insecurity in Afghanistan have severely damaged its society and economy but have strengthened its linkages and belief in shared destiny with Pakistan. But along with the common destiny, the issue of conflicting interests between the two has also emerged. The fundamental problems between the two states are that Afghanistan has remained divided into regional and ethnic lines. It has also been politically divided into two major and many smaller groups having linkage with foreign sources. The involvement of great powers and regional hegemons has made it difficult for both, especially Pakistan, to support who, the Pashtun or the non-Pashtun. Pashtun being divided due to Durand Line demarcation and inhabited the neighborhood were more frequently interacted and became the preference. Mujahideen and later Taliban, predominantly Pashtun, enjoyed more support in both wars and even in between when Afghanistan was undergoing civil war.

Afghanistan, which has been witnessing war or insurgency for the last four decades, may it be the Soviet war (1979) or the American invasion of Afghanistan against terrorism, the Mujahideen and Taliban both enjoyed good support in their Pakistani sanctuary. In Pakistan, the fighters have been enjoying popular support from state and non-state actors. Taliban fighters have been enjoying all kinds of support from Pakistan, even before the US invasion (2001); however, after the US initiated GWoT in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks, the support almost finished in the initial years. However, in the later years, Taliban fighters again got support like recruits, persuaded prospective fighters, raised funds, and stayed in touch within and with their command cadre.⁷² This aspect of the sanctuary was valuable as the Taliban could evade ISAF operations. The Pakistan-Afghanistan border is 2640 km⁷³ and could not be patrolled by the coalition forces due to the shortage of forces throughout their presence. The border provinces between both countries during the high insecurity periods were considered extreme and high-risk areas, permitting insurgent movements and shelter.

Pakistan has been alleged for keeping the safe havens of the Taliban secret throughout the insurgency period. These shelters existed in FATA (now part of KPK) and even in settled areas like Quetta, Karachi, and Lahore. Pakistan enjoyed the preferred locale for the Taliban due to its close geographical proximity to

⁷¹ Timor Sharan, and Andrew Watkins "All Quiet on the Eastern Front? Iran's Evolving Relationship with an Afghanistan in Transition. 2021." [Http://Library.fes.de/](http://Library.fes.de/). Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung (FES). Accessed August 21. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kabul/17342.pdf>.

⁷² Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010. p-99

⁷³ National Geographic Society. "The Durand Line." National Geographic Society, October 15, 2012. <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/article/durandline/#:~:text=The%20Durand%20Line%20is%20the,border%20between%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan.> 188 Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010. p-99

southern and eastern Afghanistan and the presence of the Pashtun community. The refugee's presence, having enjoyed years of support, and the rugged terrain astride Durand Line/ Pak-Afghan border made Pakistan most suited, where they could avoid even detection.¹⁸⁸ The challenge intensified further due to the un-cooperative Pakistan military and the paramilitary deployed at the border.⁷⁴ That was when Pakistan's defense forces were already contesting the TTP insurgency at their end in FATA. FATA has remained a safe haven for the Taliban and even Al-Qaeda. After being ousted from power in 2001, the Taliban made safe exits across the border to Pakistan and maintained sanctuaries. This issue of Taliban presence in Pakistan has been most annoying for the US and Afghans. The then US director of national intelligence, Dennis C. Blair, in his annual threat assessment in 2010, stated that the safe havens "is an important Taliban strength."⁷⁵

President Karzai and later President Ghani have consistently blamed Pakistan for supporting the Taliban. In the initial years, the US did not toe the Afghan line but later, in 2006-07, it also started exerting pressure on Pakistan to curb Taliban activities. Pakistan government-supported Taliban or otherwise cannot be stated with certainty but is a probability. President Musharraf has been blamed and criticized for playing a double game with the US during the war on terror. On one side, Musharraf has been forcefully chasing

⁷⁴ Thomas H. Johnson, M. Chris Mason, "Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan", *Orbis*, Volume 51, Issue 1, 2007, Pages 71-89, ISSN 0030-4387, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2006.10.006>.
(<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0030438706001104>)

⁷⁵ Dennis C. Blair, "Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence," February 2, 2010.
https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/20100202_testimony.pdf.