The legacy of the US war in Afghanistan

The United States' war in Afghanistan may be over, but the debate over the legacy of America's most protracted war has just begun.

Militarily, the US was never defeated, and the Taliban failed to inflict any cost in direct combats even when USAF was not involved. The number of personnel lost by the US over 20 years is less than 2500, and not all deaths can be attributed to the Taliban, for there have been other reasons i.e. sickness, suicides, and accidents. Now compare it to the British Empire and Soviet Union's campaigns in Afghanistan, which didn't stay for two decades but lost far more troops, and the united states got out pretty much unscathed.

In terms of tactics, It turned out as a messed-up war for the US. Intelligence failures from the day of invasion to the last day of withdrawal. The CIA took almost ten years to locate Bin Laden, failed to eliminate him within Afghanistan, and then lost one state-of-the-art stealth helicopter during the operation in Pakistan, whose wreckage reverse engineered by China.

Al Qaeda number 2, Ayman al-Zawahiri is still missing, CIA couldn't know about the whereabouts of Mullah Omar, the founder of the Taliban, and the reliable network that CIA created in the 80s in Af-Pak betrayed it this time. Drone strikes and airstrikes on wrong coordinates support this fact. A complete intelligence failure in reading the undercurrents in the country.
The only significant success the US had was when Mullah Omar's successor, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour was killed in a drone strike. It was a fatal setback for the Taliban.

Strategically, I would say it was a defeat. These are some brief points that contributed to it. There was never any clear objective from day one. Starting a new war in Iraq even before stabilizing Afghanistan, diverted the war efforts and allowed the Taliban to turn their former enemies in the neighborhood into friends. Failure in containing production of opium, today 90% of world heroin comes from Afghanistan, before the invasion opium production was its lowest but it only boomed after 2001, spent more than 2 trillion $ and all hardware is in enemies inventory.

Failed to connect with the rural players, dealt mostly with elites, and counted on parachuted leaders. Frequent Air strikes and drone strikes on wrong targets dented its image as a friend and on top, the decision to drop the biggest non-nuclear bomb in its arsenal " MOAB ", placed it in the league of other occupiers. Turning a blind eye to the corruption of Ghani and his cronies further destroyed its reputation among the public.

American administration created a quagmire for itself by signing a weak deal with the Taliban. Afghan Army was not a coward, they had been fighting bravely and fending off the Taliban since 2014 when NATO ended its combat role. But this time they just gave up, they stopped to believe their war was a just war and their rulers are worth dying for.

The mental state of a soldier when fighting against his people is starkly different than fighting against a foreign opponent. In a civil war scenario, leaders must show grit and lead by example to convince their troops that their side is right and their village friends and relatives on the other side are wrong. Nothing like that happened. The US-backed gov collapsed even before the last US troops were gone. At last, a complete failure in securing and evacuating their Afghan allies is out in the open sun.