

HOW THE TALIBAN REGAINED POWER IN AFGHANISTAN

Mona Kanwal Sheikh, Jan Werner Mathiasen,
Lars Erslev Andersen, Dino Krause,
and Ole Wæver



How the Taliban Regained Power in Afghanistan

This book examines how the Taliban were able to regain power in Afghanistan in 2021, some 20 years after the US intervention.

The volume presents an analysis of the factors that contributed to the Taliban's ability to seize power following the withdrawal of the international coalition in August 2021, marking the end of 20 years of international engagement in the country. It is the result of a thorough review of research and policy publications over the course of 20 years, and is based on open-source data, including threat assessments of the Danish intelligence services. There are multiple explanations in academic and policy reports as to why the Taliban were able to take power despite the efforts expected to prevent this from happening. Based on existing research literature, analyses, studies and reports, the book identifies five factors that are central to understanding the outcome. These factors offer overarching explanations for why the Taliban were able to regain power, with each encompassing different clusters of challenges that constituted central conditions for the Taliban takeover. Although the book is not about assigning blame, the explanations provided here can contribute to further discussion about how to ensure the necessary knowledge base for future decisions when confronted with new emergencies calling for possible international intervention.

This book will be of interest to students of security studies, conflict resolution, Asian security, military interventions, peace building, and International Relations.

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Contents

<i>List of Figures and Tables</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiv
1 Introduction	1
Why raise the question?	2
Method, sources and structure	3
Limitations	8
Brief summary of the explanatory chapters	10
2 The Taliban: Their Strength and Strategy	18
Introduction	18
Background: The history and ideological roots of the Taliban	18
The development of the Taliban 2001–21	22
<i>Combat capability and armed attacks</i>	23
<i>Territorial control</i>	27
<i>Shadow governments</i>	33
Explaining the strength of the Taliban	37
<i>The Taliban were strategically adaptable</i>	37
<i>The Taliban and the Haqqani-network aligned</i>	39
<i>The Taliban exploited the central government's legitimacy issues</i>	41
Conclusion	45
3 Negotiations with the Taliban	55
Introduction	55
Background: Negotiations without, with and only with the Taliban	56

The American negotiations detached the Afghan government from the process	60
<i>Direct dialogue between US and the Taliban</i>	60
<i>The government sidetracked</i>	61
<i>The Taliban declared themselves victors</i>	62
Intra-Afghan initiatives and the struggle for ownership	63
<i>Focus on conditions for withdrawal</i>	63
<i>The internal dialogue fell apart</i>	65
<i>Rejection of power sharing</i>	65
The regional neighbours compete for the mediator role	66
<i>Pakistan</i>	67
<i>Russia</i>	68
<i>Iran</i>	69
<i>China</i>	70
Conclusion	71

4 The US War in Afghanistan **79**

Introduction	79
Background: 9/11 and the fear of terror	82
Knowledge base: Iraq, Afghanistan, al-Qaeda and the Taliban	83
The course of the war	89
<i>Stabilisation lacking, legitimacy disappearing</i>	91
<i>Counterinsurgency or counterterrorism?</i>	93
<i>Shifting American strategies</i>	95
Consequences of the early decisions	98
<i>Enlarged enemy</i>	99
<i>Legitimacy issues</i>	101
<i>The Northern Alliance or Pashtun insurgent militias?</i>	102
<i>Dysfunctional state and lack of accountability for legitimate governance</i>	103
Conclusion	105

5 Military Capacity Building: The Main Problems **113**

Introduction	113
Background: Sustainability, ownership and coherence	114
Twenty years of military capacity building	116
<i>2001–06: Counterterrorism within the framework of Operation Enduring freedom</i>	117
<i>2006–11: Counterinsurgency under the International Security Assistance Force</i>	118

2011–21: Transition, exit strategy and the Resolute Support Mission	120
The greatest challenges facing the military capacity building	122
Short-term objectives prevented local anchoring and Afghan ownership	122
Capacity building supported NATO and US – not Afghanistan	125
Fragmented responsibility and inadequate coordination	128
Conclusion	131
6 Civilian Capacity Building: The Main Problems	141
Introduction	141
Background: The ideas and actors behind the civilian effort	142
The international effort over 20 years	145
2001–05: Focus on the legitimacy of the Afghan central government	145
2006–11: Counterinsurgency sets the framework	147
2011–21: Institution building	148
Comprehensive approach to security and development	149
The main challenges in the civilian capacity building	150
The security situation restricted the development	150
The military directed the efforts	152
Too much money	154
Domestic objectives behind the initiatives	156
External dependency	159
Conclusion	161
7 Conclusion: What Can We Learn from the War in Afghanistan?	170
Why did the Taliban regain power?	170
Lessons learned – Five problem complexes	174
Knowledge disconnect	176
Fragmentation	179
Civil–military (im)balance	182
Peace in war	185
Legitimacy	187
 Appendix: On Learning	 193
Bibliography	199
Index	239

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

1.1	The Taliban takeover – Layers of explanation	7
2.1	Taliban control of provinces 2002–2012	31
2.2	Taliban control of districts 2017–2021	32

Tables

2.1	Development of Taliban attack strength – Number of deaths caused by the Taliban	28
2.2	Total number of deaths caused by the Taliban 2001–2021	40

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Hence, the terms of reference define two main questions – the first about the considerations behind the decisions of successive Danish governments on up- and downscaling in Afghanistan. This question is *not* answered here but will be published (in Danish) in a separate volume dealing with the Danish decision-making process, which has been prepared under the leadership of Senior Researcher Mikkel Runge Olesen.

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List of Abbreviations

AAF	Afghan Air Force
AAN	Afghanistan Analyst Network
ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
ANP	Afghan National Police
APRP	<i>Afghanistan</i> Peace and Reintegration Programme
AQ	al-Qaeda
AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
ARTF	Originally the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, now the Afghanistan Resilience Trust Fund
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BSA	Bilateral Security Agreement
CA	Comprehensive Approach
CAS	Close Air Support
CDAI	Canada Defense and Foreign Affairs Institute (now the Canadian Global Affairs Institute – CGAI)
CENTCOM	United States Central Command
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (USA)
CIGI	Centre for International Governance Innovation
CIMIC	Civilian–Military Cooperation
COIN	Counterinsurgency
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
CSTC-A	Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan
CT	Counterterrorism
DATS	Danish Advisory and Training Staff
DCM	Deployable Communication Module
DDIS	Danish Defence Intelligence Service
DIIS	Danish Institute for International Studies
DoD	Department of Defense (USA)
DoS	Department of State (USA)
EASO	European Asylum Support Office

ETIM	<i>East Turkestan Islamic Movement</i>
ETT	Embedded Training Teams (USA)
EU	European Union
EUPOL	European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan
FE	Forsvarets Efterretningstjeneste (Danish Defence Intelligence Service)
FOU	Forsvarsudvalget (Defence Committee – Denmark)
G8	The Group of Eight (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, United Kingdom and United States of America)
GTD	Global Terrorism Database
HPC	High Peace Council (Afghanistan)
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
ICG	International Crisis Group
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
IED	<i>Improvised Explosive Device</i>
IJC	ISAF Joint Command
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Iran)
IS	Islamic State
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence (Pakistan)
ISIL	<i>Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant</i>
ISKP	Islamic State Khorasan Province
LOTFA	Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan
LWJ	Long War Journal
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCTC	National Counterterrorism Center (CIA)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSA	National Security Agency
NSC	National Security Council (USA)
NTM-A	NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan
NUG	National Unity Government (Afghanistan)
NUPI	Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs)
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
OHCHR	UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OMLT	Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (NATO)
PISM	Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych (Polish Institute of International Affairs)
PMC	Private Military Company
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
PTS	Programme Tahkim-e Solh

QIP	Quick Impact Projects
RSM	Resolute Support Mission (NATO)
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
SOU	Statens offentliga utredningar (Swedish Government Official Reports)
SR	Search and Rescue
SSR	Security Sector Reform
TF	Task Force
TTP	Tehrike Taliban Pakistan
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program
UHCHR	UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
URU	Udenrigsudvalget (Foreign Affairs Committee – Denmark)
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
USMC	United States Marine Corps
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WHO	World Health Organization
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

Preface

The withdrawal of the international military presence from Afghanistan in August 2021 marked the end of 20 years of Danish engagement in the country under successive Danish governments. The collapse of Afghan institutions and the Taliban's return to power created a need to evaluate Denmark's involvement to draw lessons for future peace, stabilisation and reconstruction efforts. In November 2021, a majority in the Danish Parliament requested that the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) conduct an independent historical review of Denmark's military and civilian engagement in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021. As part of this work, the review was also tasked with identifying key lessons for future international interventions and addressing the fundamental question of how the Taliban was able to regain power despite two decades of extensive international civilian and military involvement.

This volume addresses this question. It presents an analysis of the factors that, over the course of 20 years, contributed to the Taliban's ability to seize power following the withdrawal of the US-led international coalition in August 2021. The analysis in the volume is based on publicly available sources, including reports, investigations and academic literature. It was conducted under the leadership of Mona Kanwal Sheikh in collaboration with Jan Werner Mathiasen, Lars Erslev Andersen, Dino Krause and Ole Wæver.

The overall question in focus in this book seeks answers to the following:

How could the Taliban regain power in Afghanistan after 20 years of massive civil and military international efforts in the country?

The question that the volume answers is, thus, about the *international* effort and not specifically the Danish one.

The genre – Past lessons and future policies

Being defined by a commissioned framework, this book belongs to a genre distinct from conventional academic monographs. The mandate behind the inquiry was more policy-oriented and less theoretical; rooted in the ambition to learn from how the international community engaged in military and civilian efforts in Afghanistan.

Yet, despite the political mandate, the analysis engages with academic literature and is an important contribution to scholarly debates regarding the causes of the Taliban's return to power, including literature on the nature of the Taliban movement. It also has the potential to engage with the 'lessons-learned' literature on the international involvement in Afghanistan, which has either already been published or will be so in the coming years.

Several countries that were involved in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 (or in parts of this period) initiated reviews or commissioned inquiries after the collapse of the Republic. In June 2022, the Swedish Government, for example, appointed a committee to evaluate Sweden's overall engagement in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. The committee's remit included describing and evaluating the lessons learned, but with a specific focus on the impact of activities on women and girls, as well as analysing Sweden's evacuation operation in August 2021.¹

The Dutch government commissioned an independent analysis conducted jointly by the Netherlands Institute for Military History (NIMH) and the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies. The project is more comprehensive – also in terms of budget – than the Danish inquiry, and is covering both the Dutch military engagement, diplomatic activities, and non-governmental involvement, aiming to reconstruct and interpret the context and consequences of the Dutch presence in Afghanistan.²

In contrast to the inquiries led by scholars (such as this one), Germany's Bundestag established a *parliamentary* commission to scrutinise the country's military and civilian mission in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021. An interim report published in 2024 critically assessed the German focus on quantitative contributions over qualitative outcomes, highlighting a lack of realistic assessments and resistance to independent reviews during the mission.³ Similar concerns are also described and shared in the analyses in this volume.

Yet, another type of inquiry was initiated by the UK government in December 2022. It established an independent commission to investigate alleged unlawful activities by British Armed Forces during operations in Afghanistan between 2010 and 2013. The inquiry is particularly focused on the conduct of British special forces and the adequacy of subsequent investigations into the allegations.⁴

Finally, the US Congress established the Afghanistan War Commission in December 2021 to conduct a comprehensive review of key decisions related to US military, intelligence, foreign assistance and diplomatic involvement in Afghanistan from June 2001 to August 2021. The Commission's mandate includes examining strategic, diplomatic and operational decisions throughout the 20-year period.⁵

While not a comprehensive list of national reviews, the inquiries mentioned above illustrate how they vary widely in scope, budget, mandate and institutional anchoring. Some of the involved countries have undertaken broad historical or policy reviews, while others have focused more narrowly on allegations of unlawful conduct by their special forces. Despite differing emphases (on, e.g., political decision-making, outcomes relating to gender equity, war crimes or evacuation operations), these inquiries reflect a broader recognition of the need for accountability, (self-) critically assessing the role of the intervening countries. In other words: Learning from one of the most

long-term and multi-layered international interventions of the 21st century. In the Danish case, the element of learning has been closely connected to the ambition to inform future foreign, development and defence policies.

The landscape of explanations

The Taliban's return to power following the collapse of the Afghan Republic in August 2021 has been the subject of several analyses across academic, policy and journalistic circles. It is important to note that the selected foci in this volume are conditioned by the framework of the commission from the Danish parliament. The commission was particularly interested in lessons related to civilian and military capacity building, including the so-called comprehensive approach, but also the surprising strength of the Taliban *vis-à-vis* the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF).

Recent research and journalism have provided numerous explanations as to why the Taliban could regain power. While we address the *political* explanations in the introduction and conclusion of the volume, the following is an attempt at placing the volume in the academic debates about the reason for the outcome in Afghanistan. While the relative weight given to the explanations differs in the literature, there are some recurring explanatory clusters to which this volume speaks: (1) the internal fragility of the Afghan state, including the challenging role of Afghan powerholders; (2) the failures of international strategy and state-building efforts (mostly related to the decisions of the US, NATO and the UN); (3) the agency and tactical evolution of the Taliban; (4) the enabling role of regional actors, particularly Pakistan; and (5) the conceptual framework underpinning Western intervention representing a major disconnect to the local realities in Afghanistan. Although not mutually exclusive, when seen in isolation from each other, these explanations can be reductionist, placing excessive emphasis on one factor. Taken together, they provide a multi-dimensional account of why the Taliban were able to regain power, despite the initial US-led decision to topple the regime in 2001 in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. While the present volume includes all of these perspectives, they are given different weight and organised in a manner that, in our view, best responds to the commissioned framework – as explained in the introductory chapter.

The first set of explanations in some of the recent academic and journalistic literature foregrounds *the internal fragility or weaknesses of the Afghan state*, especially its inability to generate legitimacy or inclusivity. Jamal and Maley, for example, argue that Afghanistan was plagued by elite fragmentation and predatory governance, meaning that the local Afghan population experienced the state not as a protector but as an exploitative force.⁶ This was, they argue, particularly evident during the terms of Ashraf Ghani due to his increasing centralisation of power.⁷ Elections became less credible over time, while the Kabul-based administration grew increasingly isolated from rural constituencies. Some of the literature traces these deficiencies back to the 2001 Bonn process, which produced an overly centralised, presidential system that excluded key Afghan actors, including the Taliban.⁸ Malkasian emphasises that this early decision not to engage in real political settlement allowed warlords and patronage networks to

dominate the new Afghan state, setting the foundation for systemic dysfunction that would persist throughout the war. The present volume confirms this picture, demonstrating how international community support for this exclusionary model laid the foundations for long-term instability. Noori and Coburn add to this perspective by examining the final days of the Republic, describing a ‘doomed evacuation’ characterised by administrative collapse, paralysed leadership and a growing perception among Afghan elites that the regime had become unviable.⁹ This aligns with Malkasian’s observation that development funds were often channelled through elites with little local legitimacy, reinforcing corruption and alienation rather than trust. Rather than legitimising the government, aid often deepened the credibility crisis. Overall, such a perspective highlights that the Taliban did not so much conquer Afghanistan as inherit the space vacated by a delegitimised and brittle state. This point is also valid in relation to the ANDSF. Saikal observes that the ANDSF suffered from pervasive corruption, inadequate training, reliance on US logistics and air support, and the widespread ‘ghost soldiers’ phenomenon; non-existent personnel listed on payrolls to inflate troop numbers and access more external funds. Such structural weaknesses contributed to demoralisation within the ranks, which, in turn, eased the Taliban’s advance.¹⁰

A second set of explanations critiques Western strategic failure, particularly the disjuncture between military objectives and political outcomes.¹¹ Kilcullen and Mills, for example, underscore how battlefield successes did not translate into durable political outcomes highlighting what they describe as a consistent failure to ‘convert tactical victories into strategic success’.¹² They argue that the international community often prioritised technocratic metrics, such as the number of schools built or troops trained, over building sustainable and legitimate political institutions. By 2021, nearly half of the Afghan state budget depended on foreign aid. Once withdrawn, the state rapidly collapsed, exposing the extent of its dependency.¹³ This point is also raised in the volume in hand when evaluating the challenges in the civilian and military capacity building. In his book *Blood Year*, David Kilcullen further connects these strategic failures to the broader trajectory of the post-9/11 War on Terror, which prioritised counterterrorism leading to fragmented governance and ‘militarised’ development practices.¹⁴ A particularly strong point of convergence across the literature dealing with issues of strategic failure is the criticism of the Doha Agreement between the US and the Taliban. This is also touched on in this volume. Jamal and Maley have described this deal as a de facto ‘unilateral withdrawal agreement’.¹⁵ The Doha process marginalised the Afghan government and failed to include broader local representation, ultimately weakening the perceived legitimacy of the Afghan government.¹⁶ This was a counterintuitive strategy *if* the purpose was to build a strong, legitimate state. The consequence was the demoralisation of the Afghan government and a psychological tipping point. As this volume demonstrates, part of the story is that when it came to US negotiations with the Taliban, there was suddenly no international alliance deemed important enough to involve, no partners considered important enough to consult with, and the US felt entitled to decide and proceed alone.

A third set of explanations found in the recent academic literature concerns the Taliban’s agency, tactical and strategic flexibility, and/or internal discipline as key

to understanding their success. Farrell and Semple, for example, describe the Taliban's strategy as being focused both on intensifying their insurgency and on selective diplomatic overtures, particularly via their office in Doha (Qatar).¹⁷ Farrell and Semple describe how the adaptability included switching from conventional engagements to guerrilla tactics during the 2009–11 US troop surge, allowing them to survive and regroup despite suffering heavy casualties.¹⁸ Kilcullen and Mills also highlight how the Taliban evolved into a multifaceted movement, combining guerrilla tactics, media messaging and rudimentary governance to win support and undermine the Afghan state's legitimacy at the local level.¹⁹ Like we do in this volume, Jamal and Maley note the Taliban's effective use of local governance and their capacity to outmanoeuvre overstretched Afghan forces.²⁰ Farrell and Semple describe how a notable sign of their growing military capacity came with the Taliban's 2015 capture of Kunduz, which shocked international observers and demonstrated their ability to conduct major offensive operations.²¹ These perspectives challenge the focus on Western failures alone, raising the overall question of how much can in fact be explained by the Taliban's own abilities and capacities if they were seen in isolation from the strategic miscalculations of the intervening countries. Part of this perspective is also what Noori and Colburn call 'willfull ignorance'; that is, that US and Afghan officials ignored clear warnings of collapse; progress was exaggerated; failures were downplayed or hidden; corruption and dysfunction were well-documented but tolerated; the Taliban's strength and local dissatisfaction were underestimated; and Intelligence and internal warnings were dismissed.²²

A fourth theme – found in several analyses – is the role of regional actors, above all Pakistan. Saikal, for example, describes Pakistan's strategy as one of strategic depth, wherein the Taliban served as a proxy force to counter Indian influence in Afghanistan.²³ Malkasian likewise points to the historical support provided by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), arguing that the Taliban leadership's sanctuary in Pakistan was crucial to their long-term viability.²⁴ However, Malkasian also emphasises how this support did not equate to direct control, and the Taliban operated with substantial autonomy, meaning that Pakistan's leverage, while real, was not absolute.²⁵ In this volume, we also point to this ambivalence, particularly because the emergence of the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) in 2007 was a major domestic factor that must have impacted the country's approach towards – at least part of – the Afghan Taliban.²⁶ Pakistan had no obvious interest in a purely Taliban-run government due to the domestic instability that the TTP had created.

Finally, the conceptual foundation of Western intervention is also a frequent explanation in the literature that deals with the outcome of the 20-year war. Drawing on Foucauldian and postcolonial theory, Sahill, for example, argues that the language of 'development', 'security', and 'governance' functioned not as neutral descriptors but as technologies of control – power mechanisms that constrained Afghan political imagination and enabled practices of confinement and exclusion.²⁷ By imposing a liberal state-building template, international actors not only misdiagnosed Afghan society but also foreclosed alternative political solutions. From this standpoint, the collapse of the Republic is not only to be seen as a simple failure of implementation, as it represents a deeper epistemological crisis – one that

reflects the limitations of how Afghanistan was conceptualised and governed. The 2004 Constitution, for example, established a highly centralised presidential system, which alienated many non-Pashtun groups and marginalised legitimate local authorities. This centralisation proved inefficient and delegitimising in a country with deeply rooted local governance structures.²⁸ This – the conceptual assumptions underlying the institution-building thinking – also forms part of this volume, not least in our analysis of how military and civilian capacity building was implemented in Afghanistan. Part of this conceptual issue relates to the failure to understand local culture. Saikal strongly suggests that repeated failures to adjust to Afghan political culture – such as the insistence on centralisation, exclusion of tribal mechanisms and failure to include the Taliban in early reconciliation – contributed significantly to state fragility and ultimately its collapse.²⁹ Conversely, the Taliban's alignment with local values gave them a strategic advantage, unlike the Western-backed government, as Malkasian's work describes.³⁰

Seen together, the Taliban's return is best explained not through a single causal lens, but through intersecting failures of state-building, strategy, security politics and an underestimation of 'the enemy'. Whether the emphasis is on elite fragmentation, international disengagement, insurgent adaptation or conceptual fallacies, these works collectively cast light on how, in many ways, the collapse of the Afghan Republic in 2021 was a long time in the making. Given the relative weight of all the interests and conditions that were squeezed into 'the intervention basket', perhaps it ultimately became the only possible outcome. As Jamal and Maley write, the collapse was more 'death by a thousand cuts' than 'falling dominos', meaning a breakdown triggered by multiple factors such as contradictory signals, failed diplomacy and elite fragmentation.³¹

This volume is less concerned with a singular explanatory lens (e.g., external betrayal, insurgent learning or governance failure) and more attuned to the **dialectical interplay between different events, actors and decisions**. Hopefully, it offers a **layered analysis** in which local actors such as the Taliban and government officials are all seen as **agents within a dynamic environment**, conditioned by regional and international decisions. In this way, this volume can be read as a synthesis of major explanations as to why the outcome of the 20-year war ended with the Taliban in power.

Notes

- 1 [Swedish Parliamentary Committee \(2024\)](#), *Sweden in Afghanistan 2001–2021: Experiences and Lessons Learned*. SOU 2024:92, Stockholm: Government of Sweden.
- 2 Netherlands Institute for Military History & NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (2025), *The Netherlands and Afghanistan 2001–2021*, Government of the Netherlands.
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- 5 [Afghanistan War Commission \(2024\)](#), *First Interim Report*, U.S. Congress, 22 August 2024.
- 6 Ahmad Jamal and William Maley (2023), *The Decline and Fall of Republican Afghanistan*, Hurst & Co., chapters 2, 5, 9.
- 7 Jamal and Maley, *Decline and Fall*, chapter 5.
- 8 Carter [Malkasian \(2021\)](#), *The American War in Afghanistan*, Oxford University Press, chapters 5, 6, 7.
- 9 Arsalan Noori and Noah Coburn (2023), *The Last Days of the Afghan Republic: A Doomed Evacuation Twenty Years in the Making*, Rowman & Littlefield, chapter 12.
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1 Introduction

On 8 July 2021, US President Joe Biden invited the press corps to the White House to prepare the American public for the final withdrawal from Afghanistan. From the podium, he sought to pre-empt critics by emphasising that a continued presence after 20 years would not alter the outcome:

After 20 years — a trillion dollars spent training and equipping hundreds of thousands of Afghan National Security and Defense Forces, 2,448 Americans killed, 20,722 more wounded, and untold thousands coming home with unseen trauma to their mental health — I will not send another generation of Americans to war in Afghanistan with no reasonable expectation of achieving a different outcome.¹

A journalist followed up with a question about whether it was now inevitable that the Taliban would seize power in Afghanistan. Biden categorically dismissed this notion, referring to the 300,000 well-equipped troops and an air force on the one side versus 75,000 Taliban fighters on the other.

On 15 August 2021, slightly more than one month after the press conference, the Taliban captured Afghanistan's capital, Kabul. Over the course of a few weeks, the international community looked on as the Taliban took district after district and province after province. Resistance from the Afghan army appeared non-existent. While there had been armed conflict in some areas, other districts were handed over peacefully.² The Taliban victory was consolidated when Afghan President Ashraf Ghani fled the country on the same day the Taliban took Kabul, issuing a press release acknowledging that they must be regarded as the victors of the war.³

The withdrawal from Afghanistan unfolded amidst dramatic scenes: Islamic State (IS) carried out an attack near Kabul International Airport in the aftermath of the distressing evacuation images from the airport. These chaotic scenes were reported intensively by the international press, characterised by panic, desperation, fear and shock leading up to the Taliban ultimately taking over. When the war began in 2001, Afghanistan was home to Osama bin Laden, the founder of al-Qaeda; al-Qaeda had flown two commercial airliners into the World Trade Center towers in New York City, and a third had struck the Pentagon, near Washington, D.C. A total

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2 *How the Taliban Regained Power in Afghanistan*

of 2,977 people lost their lives in the attacks. When the war concluded in 2021, Afghanistan was still home to al-Qaeda, even though Osama bin Laden had been killed. At the same time, Afghanistan had also become home to one of the branches of IS, namely the Islamic State Khorasan (ISK), which operated throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan and had also been linked to attempted attacks in Europe.⁴ In other words, the threat from global terrorism persisted, and in a more fragmented form than previously.

As the Taliban streamed their takeover with symbolic images from the presidential palace, it became painfully clear that Afghan state institutions had collapsed, leaving the civilian population facing yet another economic and humanitarian crisis. But many other questions emerged: How could this ever happen in a country that once hosted 140,000 international troops? And how could this apparently occur against expectations just weeks after the American president had reassured from the White House podium that such an outcome was unlikely?

Why raise the question?

The question of why the Taliban were able to regain power in Afghanistan is important. The intervening countries played a role in shaping the course of the war and therefore share a degree of responsibility for the outcome. It is also crucial to consider this question on behalf of the populations of the intervening countries, who placed their trust in the decisions made by successive governments regarding Afghanistan. For what response can be offered to those who believed that the decades-long intervention had ensured a regime change, established sustainable state institutions, countered terrorist movements, and developed the capacity of the Afghan security forces to enable them to assume responsibility for security?

This question is obviously even more significant for the Afghans who, trusting in the promises made by the United States and the international community to create a democratic country with equal rights for all genders, collaborated with international forces in the hope of creating a better future. The 20 years of war that culminated in the dramatic evacuation of international personnel and local partners⁵ came at a considerable cost, adding further relevance to the question. Some of this price can be quantified, while other aspects of the consequences of the war are more difficult to assess, including the mental and psychological traumas inflicted on both local Afghans and deployed soldiers and specialists.⁶ And some consequences of the war have yet to be determined. In terms of casualty figures, the war claimed some 176,000 lives, including 46,319 civilian Afghans.⁷ Neighbouring Pakistan also suffered significant losses. An assessment from Brown University indicates that approximately 66,650 Pakistanis were killed in the years 2001–21, including 24,099 civilians, with thousands resulting from the American drone campaign that followed 9/11, and even more due to the escalation of the conflict between the Pakistani Taliban and the Pakistani government.⁸

The Western alliance lost 3,468 soldiers, 2,324 of whom were American soldiers.⁹ A total of 44 Danish soldiers lost their lives and 241 were wounded during the war.

In addition to the loss of life and the traumas experienced by deployed soldiers, advisors and local Afghans during the 20-year war, there were also material costs: The USA spent \$2.3 trillion,¹⁰ while the UK has estimated their military expenditures alone at £27.7 billion.¹¹ Similarly, Sweden and Norway have estimated their total expenditures at approximately Swedish krone (SEK) 11 billion¹² and Norwegian krone (NKK) 20 billion, respectively.¹³ The total costs of the Danish engagement in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 are approximately Danish krone (DKK) 20 billion. Of this, military expenditures accounted for a total of DKK 12.2 billion, with DKK 11.4 billion allocated to the international Operation Enduring Freedom and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), while costs related to NATO's capacity-building mission (Resolute Support Mission – RSM) amounted to approximately DKK 762.5 million.¹⁴

The question of why the Taliban were able to regain power is ultimately relevant in light of one of the central principles of a democratic society: *accountability*. The decisions, presence and approach of the intervening countries play a role in answering the question of why the Taliban regained power. Obviously, the accountability discussion is complicated: In the intervening countries, successive governments have made decisions, and retrospective attempts at understanding the context and considerations at the time often occur under different circumstances. Nevertheless, the ongoing and open discourse regarding the background of political decisions is always of central importance in a just society. While this book does not aim to assign blame, the explanations we provide regarding the Taliban takeover can contribute to discussions on how we ensure the necessary knowledge base for future decisions regarding war and during the course of war.

Method, sources and structure

The question of why the Taliban were able to seize power *despite* the efforts that were expected to prevent them from doing so can obviously be answered from several different angles. Based on existing research literature, analyses, inquiries and reports, we have identified **five factors** that are central to understanding the outcome. Our methodology has thus been inductive: We have reviewed relevant materials and identified patterns; that is, the areas where a high degree of consensus can be traced regarding the challenges faced throughout the 20 years of conflict. It is therefore our clear expectation that experts and practitioners who have engaged with the War in Afghanistan and the Taliban will recognise the factors and challenges we identify.

More specifically, the book is based on reviews and an examination of existing Danish and international compilations of experience and research literature that can illuminate the conditions that, despite 20 years of massive international civilian and military effort, allowed the Taliban to regain power. Specifically, we have read inquiries, reports and analyses, summarised their main points and subsequently extracted the prevailing trends and conclusions. A complete overview of the source material (651 texts/reports/sources in total) can be found in the bibliography,

4 *How the Taliban Regained Power in Afghanistan*

and some of the sources are described in greater detail in the following chapters in this book.

This part of the inquiry is based on the following types of sources:

- **Danish and international lessons learned reports** (e.g., Afghan Analyst Network and International Crisis Group). The compilations also include independent country-specific collections of experiences (e.g., other inquiries and analyses initiated in the USA/SIGAR, Denmark, Norway, Sweden), as well as reports from international organisations such as the EU, UNAMA and USIP.
- **Research literature** on the Taliban, al-Qaeda, the USA, Afghanistan and regional interests in Afghanistan.
- **Relevant statistical data** (e.g., Uppsala University data on the conflict in Afghanistan), including budgetary figures and statistics concerning the war (e.g., from the UN).
- **Archival material from the USA**, primarily concerning the planning of the war and its early years, based on material from the National Security Archive, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., and the George W. Bush Presidential Library, Dallas.
- **Threat and risk assessments** from the Danish Defence Intelligence Service.

The threat and risk assessments we have analysed from the Danish Defence Intelligence Service are all unclassified. Like most other sources, they contain evaluations of the situation in Afghanistan and the challenges ‘on the ground’ related to weakening the Taliban’s influence. In conjunction with the other sources, these assessments have contributed to shedding light on the developments in Afghanistan. The inquiry team behind this book has also held background meetings with various stakeholders possessing special insight into the challenges faced in Afghanistan, including journalists, NGO representatives, other researchers and experts on the Taliban and Afghanistan, the Danish Veterans Centre, former deployed personnel in Afghanistan, Pakistani officials and former Afghan government representatives. These discussions are not statistically significant; we do not base any conclusions on them, nor do they serve as data sources. Methodologically, we have used them to test ourselves continuously for blind spots, to assess our understanding, and finally to verify whether eyewitness accounts are also represented in the literature, archives and the reports we have reviewed.¹⁵

Based on our analytical work, the processing of the sources we have examined and the framework set out in the terms of reference document, we have chosen to address the question posed in the terms of reference based on five factors. These five factors represent overarching explanations for why the Taliban were able to regain power, but each also encompasses distinct clusters of challenges that constitute central conditions for the Taliban takeover. Although the weighting of the relevant factors may vary across the different sources we have reviewed, the challenges we identify reflect a relatively high degree of consensus in the research literature and evaluation reports.

The book is structured around the five factors and will be presented in the following order:

The strength and strategy of the Taliban movement: The first explanatory chapter begins by outlining what we know about the development of the Taliban over the 20-year period. We examine the evolution of their combat capabilities, territorial control and the establishment of shadow governments over time. This provides insight into a movement that gradually developed over the course of the entire war. The overall picture is that they were able to conduct more and increasingly lethal attacks, to expand their presence into areas where they had not previously held control and to increasingly become part of local governance (as they had been before being ousted). The Taliban gradually grew stronger, already beginning in 2005–06, despite short-term setbacks. This chapter presents what can be called the ‘Taliban-specific’ explanations for these developments, particularly their strategic adaptability, their integration with the Haqqani network (a competing movement from the Cold War era), and their ability to exploit the weaknesses of the Afghan central government.

Negotiations with the Taliban: The second explanatory chapter describes how the US withdrawal agreement with the Taliban (the Doha Agreement) and regional peace initiatives paved the way for their advances and military victory. The US negotiations with the Taliban took place independently of the Afghan government, which effectively expanded the Taliban’s room for manoeuvre. The chapter also outlines the failed attempts at national reconciliation in Afghanistan and how the political trajectory in Afghanistan over the 20 years shifted from one extreme to another: First by excluding the Taliban from any dialogue regarding a transitional government and participation in the parliamentary system, to having the Taliban as the primary – and sole – dialogue partner. Finally, the chapter describes how the neighbouring countries also adjusted their respective approaches to the Taliban, partly as a counterbalance to the exclusionary US line and partly as an expression of their own national security interests, including the threat posed by IS. Overall, this meant that from 2011 onwards, the Taliban were increasingly viewed as a legitimate dialogue partner and, in some cases, a collaborator in the fight against globally oriented jihadism.

The US War: The third explanatory chapter focuses on the US War in Afghanistan, because the US unilaterally took the decisions regarding the war, its initiation and conclusion. Despite the internationalisation that the USA anticipated during the planning phase – initiated immediately after the capture of Kabul in November 2001 – the US remained the largest and most influential actor in the war. The American approach largely defined the focus for their allies, including Denmark and NATO. To address the question of why the Taliban regained power, a specific understanding of the American role in the planning, execution and termination of the war is therefore indispensable. This chapter outlines three crucial American decisions made at the outset of the war that influenced its course until the end. The challenges associated with these decisions

reflected both a knowledge problem and created the legitimacy issues that the US and its allies grappled with – and which the Taliban could exploit to their advantage in their mobilisation campaigns.

Military capacity building of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces

(ANDSF): The fourth explanatory chapter discusses the challenges involved in the military capacity building of the ANDSF. Had the Afghan army possessed the capability and willingness to fight against the Taliban when international forces were withdrawing, the Taliban would not have come to power; at least not at the same pace. This chapter thus addresses the challenges of military capacity building, an area that was already identified as a central component of international involvement in 2002, but which became particularly prominent in the NATO mission in 2014. In Danish public discourse, surprise was expressed over the inability of the Afghan army to hold its ground; however, a review of the existing evaluations initiated during the process identifies a range of challenges that remained relevant from the start of the war until the Taliban regained power in 2021.

Civilian capacity building: The final explanatory chapter concerns the civilian efforts, including the Comprehensive Approach. Civilian efforts have often been understood as a bulwark against the legitimacy of the Taliban, as civilian assistance is typically associated with the needs of the civilian population. We have therefore highlighted the challenges related to this, as they are intertwined with the evolution of the legitimacy of the Taliban over the 20 years. The vast majority of economic aid was provided outside the Afghan central government, with private companies used as subcontractors for development and security related to this aid. The national reservations of the contributing countries and their specific development policy objectives meant that the civilian efforts remained fragmented, short-term and uncoordinated.

In isolation, these five perspectives cannot explain the Taliban takeover; together, however, they can be viewed as pieces contributing to a multidimensional picture of why the Taliban were able to regain power. At the same time, challenges within one area compounded the challenges in another, making it misleading to consider the explanations independently of one another. For instance, the ability of the Taliban to mobilise played off of the American approach in Afghanistan, and the challenges in both military and civilian capacity building were interconnected with this.

If one imagines a hierarchy of explanations, the first three chapters (closest to the innermost circle) can be understood as more direct explanations for the question of the Taliban takeover, while the two chapters on capacity building represent explanations that cannot stand alone to the same degree (Figure 1.1).

In contrast to several of the analyses and reports published thus far, this book specifically prioritises the inclusion of Taliban-specific elements towards painting a detailed portrait of the Taliban's development. The explanations of how the Taliban took over lie both in the context-specific factors, namely the *particular Afghan and regional realities* that the American-led coalition intervened in, but *also* in the

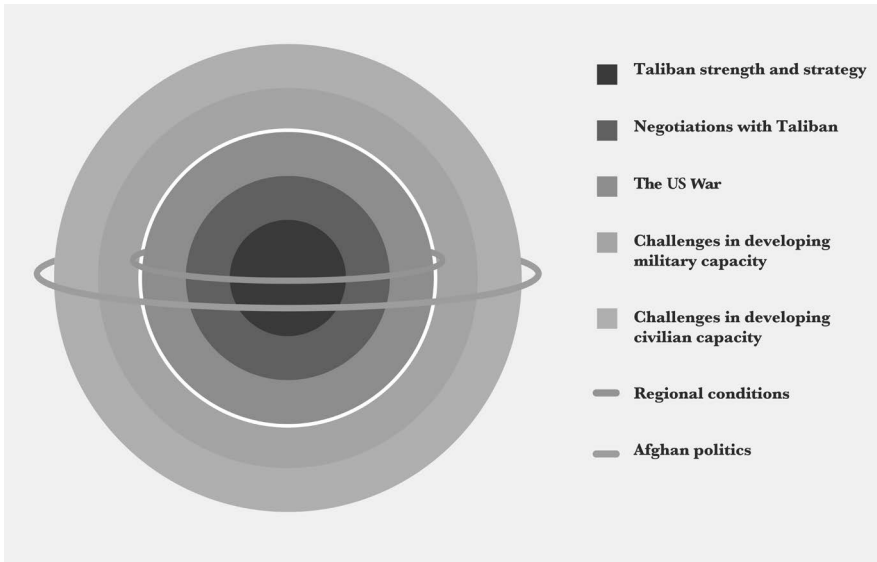


Figure 1.1 The Taliban takeover – Layers of explanation

Taliban's own capabilities as a movement. The significance of Afghan politics and social relations is incorporated throughout all of the chapters, while the role played by Afghanistan's neighbouring countries is particularly evident in the first three chapters: The chapters on the Taliban's strength and strategy, the negotiations and the US War.

The explanations for how the Taliban took power also reside in some of the *choices made by the US and regional actors throughout the process*, particularly about when the Taliban were excluded from and included in a political process, and how this occurred. Additionally, the decisions made by the Americans – often rather arbitrarily – during the planning and execution of the war played a crucial role.

The more indirect explanations for the Taliban takeover are found in the *intentions or ambitions that were never realised*: The capacity building of the Afghan army and the civilian capacity building are part of this. The underlying idea was that building a strong central state together with sustainable state institutions would act as a bulwark against the Taliban taking over, ultimately leading Afghanistan in a different direction than was the case in 2001.

Overall, our five explanatory chapters and the clusters of challenges they describe reflect how it is difficult to imagine a quick fix for the diverse problems that emerged along the way. In hindsight, however, a quick-fix mentality often paradoxically characterised the international involvement: New challenges emerged continuously over the 20 years; new solutions were introduced to address these challenges; which in turn triggered a new series of issues. The ongoing adjustments to troop levels, the desire to leave a 'light footprint' in Afghanistan (even as troop

numbers peaked at 140,000), the significant shifts in the understanding of and approach to negotiations with the Taliban, and the dynamics between aid and corruption all illustrate the nearly constant problems faced.

At the same time, it is worth noting how Afghanistan was the arena for many competing agendas: Not only did the Americans and NATO have their own interests, but the regional actors and neighbouring countries also had domestic political agendas that influenced the situation, while the various interests among Afghan actors shaped the conflict landscape.¹⁶ A schematic representation of the explanations for the Taliban takeover based on five main factors therefore risks oversimplification, reducing the complexity of how the strategies, decisions and behaviours of *so many* actors impact one another.

Our concluding ‘lessons learned’ chapter reflects on the difficult questions that one must assume hold political interest: Could different actions have ensured a different outcome? What can we derive from the various explanations as we look forward? Given the book’s conclusions as to why the Taliban were able to take over, what knowledge is useful for future peace, stabilisation and reconstruction efforts? Simultaneously, a critical paraphrasing of the mission of this book in terms of what can be learned from the War in Afghanistan is how to avoid a situation in the future where the international efforts and decisions we engage in become so disconnected from developments ‘on the ground’, as in Afghanistan. Failure is one thing; but doing so over 20 years with extensive human, economic and political consequences is another.

Limitations

This book does not focus on military errors at the tactical and operational levels, as doing so would require a different type of investigation and source material than that upon which our interpretation of the terms of reference for this book is based. In principle, however, military tactical errors or challenges can also contribute to explaining the Taliban takeover: If the objective was to combat the Taliban, were sufficient resources and personnel deployed? Were the right battles fought at the right places, at the right times, and with the right means? Should the military effort have been intensified at the outset or later in the process? How might a different configuration of military operations have potentially avoided the constant need for security creation to reach a stabilisation phase that could prove more sustainable?

The wording of the terms of reference for this book, the temporal framework and the allocation of resources have established a framework for our investigation. However, we have become more ambitious in our investigative work than the terms of reference suggested in three respects: We had to begin by mapping the Taliban’s 20-year development and draw on multiple sources to establish a picture that we have not seen in other investigations or analyses. Thus, we are presenting a more systematic overall picture than previously seen in public evaluations and reports. Additionally, we have accessed American archives to supplement the existing knowledge regarding the early American decisions in the war, as these appeared essential for understanding the challenges that characterised the conflict until its

conclusion. This emphasis on the early phase of the war serves to complement existing analyses (e.g., those published by SIGAR after the Taliban took over), which highlight what went wrong in the *final phase* of the war.

While primarily relying on existing analyses, our work has centred on communicating the insights that emerge as consistent explanations in the source material. Our focus is also determined and limited by the interest in the terms of reference in why the capacity-building efforts failed *and what the intervening parties can learn*. The chapters all (albeit the first to a lesser extent) discuss the roles played by NATO, the Americans and other intervening parties.

The way we have unfolded the significance of the Afghan and regional context has been directly related to explaining the Taliban's legitimacy and mobilisation capacity, as well as their increased room for manoeuvre over the years. Even though the Afghan reality – including, particularly, the political elite, their economic privileges, armed militias and cultural differences between urban and rural areas – naturally plays an important role in the challenges arising in relation to capacity building, we have instead sought to allow the interplay between local dynamics and the implementation of intervention efforts to serve as the explanatory framework. We aimed to avoid the oversimplified conclusion that Afghanistan's 'exotic' or exceptional character primarily explains how the Taliban regained power, instead directing our focus towards the implications of the overarching strategies laid out by the US and NATO, and how these were executed.

As numerous inquiries and reports have already described, there were corruption-related challenges in Afghanistan, and the Afghan power elite played a significant role in delegitimising itself. However, the intervening countries had access to a wealth of insights regarding Afghanistan's socio-economic characteristics, political culture, clientelism and the legacy of the Cold War, during which the country was an arena for a proxy war between the superpowers. This book therefore views Afghanistan as *a condition*; that is, the reality that we/our politicians chose to intervene in – and therefore cannot be a self-sustaining explanation for the failure of the intervention. Some reports and evaluations give these conditions more weight than does the book in hand (often with the point that the intervening countries knew too little about Afghanistan's specific characteristics), but to avoid Afghanistan being seen as an explanation in itself, we have chosen to integrate Afghan conditions into all of the chapters as a fundamental premise where relevant. We will return to the notion of the distinctiveness of Afghanistan as an explanation in the concluding chapter.

A relevant, emerging question, which we also address in the conclusions at the end of each chapter and in the concluding chapter, is the issue of knowledge and intention: How much did sustainable democratisation really matter? Why was the available knowledge about Afghanistan – both before the intervention in 2001 and the knowledge produced during the process – not used more actively to ensure a different outcome? And more cynically: Would a deeper understanding of Afghan society's preferences, culture and norms have changed anything at all, or were other logics driving the dynamics and decisions of the war? How did the intention to leave Afghanistan with sustainable democratic institutions compare to other objectives?

Our delineation of the five factors reflects that this is a book, the primary aim of which is to deepen our understanding of the decisions in which Denmark participated through NATO and as an American ally, thereby *allowing us to learn something ourselves*. Little can be learned from drawing an exotic picture of distant populations that did not desire democracy or were unwilling to fight ‘even though we tried to teach them’. Had the terms of reference been formulated by former Afghan presidents Hamid Karzai or Ashraf Ghani, the emphasis in this book would likely have been different – likely with a greater focus on *their* roles and room for manoeuvre.

Brief summary of the explanatory chapters

The book has answered the question of why the Taliban were able to regain power based on five factors, each addressed in its own chapter. The chapters describe various developments over the 20 years together with the clusters of challenges that constitute central conditions for the Taliban takeover.¹⁷ Each chapter concludes with a partial conclusion highlighting the most significant aspects, and our concluding chapter summarises the findings across the chapters.

The strength and strategy of the Taliban movement: This chapter describes how the Taliban gradually grew stronger from 2005 to 2006 onwards, despite brief setbacks. Our review of how the Taliban developed reveals how the advancing progress occurred neither overnight, during the final phase of the war, nor in the aftermath of the withdrawal agreement made with the Americans in 2020. In the first years after 2001, the Taliban had been pushed back and significantly impacted by their severe military defeat and the loss of large numbers of fighters. However, the Taliban leadership quickly began to focus on how they could rebuild a somewhat coherent organisation.

The Taliban began to expand territorially around 2005, and their armed attacks became more sophisticated. By 2009, the Taliban enjoyed measurable influence in almost all Afghan provinces. Although the American ‘surge’ temporarily weakened the Taliban and reduced the extent of their territorial control, the overall level of Taliban armed activity remained relatively stable. After a significant drop in the number of international troops leading up to the turning point in 2014 and the transfer of formal security responsibility from ISAF (NATO) to ANDSF (Afghanistan), the Taliban were once again able to recruit larger numbers of fighters and conducted both more frequent and increasingly sophisticated attacks. Their increased combat capability was accompanied by increases in their territorial control, particularly in the years 2015–17. The reduced presence of international troops, many of whom had been engaged in civilian roles, left a significant gap that the Taliban exploited. They expanded their shadow government structures, while the Afghan government, in contrast, grew weaker in the Taliban-controlled areas.

The Taliban’s expansion – both in terms of the frequency and sophistication of their attacks across large parts of Afghanistan, their military control and civilian

presence in new areas – continued until 2021. There were minor setbacks, including a ceasefire in June 2018 and increased American airstrikes during 2017–18. The Taliban quickly regained their strength, however, and the number of Taliban-controlled districts doubled from 2018 to 2020. From early 2021 until the final takeover in August that year, the Taliban control over Afghan districts increased markedly.

The chapter identifies three movement-specific explanations for the Taliban's development. First, the Taliban were strategically adaptable and resilient throughout the period. They adjusted their command structures, their methods of combat, their organisation, diversified their fundraising, refined their tactics, and expanded their recruitment base. Second, they allied themselves with the Haqqani network. Although the Taliban faced internal crises, they overcame their divisions, and the organisational integration in 2016 proved crucial for their rapid advance in the final phase of the war. Third, the Taliban exploited the weaknesses of the Afghan central government, particularly the challenges to their legitimacy that they faced outside of Kabul. The disconnection between the central government in Kabul and the local authorities at the district and village levels, along with several scandals that exposed brutality and compromised the idea of democracy, proved advantageous for the Taliban.

Negotiations with the Taliban: This chapter describes how the American withdrawal agreement (the Doha Agreement) with the Taliban and regional peace initiatives facilitated the Taliban's advance and military victory. The American negotiations with the Taliban occurred independently of the Afghan government, which expanded the Taliban's latitude while the democratically elected Afghan government – in all its fragmentation and unpopularity – was overlooked.

Obviously, insufficient investment was made in a political solution or an *Afghan* peace agreement, where sufficiently broad representation could have served as a bulwark against what ultimately became an exclusive Taliban government. The exclusion of amnesty and inclusion in the initial phase of the war, not allowing the Taliban to establish themselves as a political party, and the lack of international investment in a formal negotiation track including both Taliban representatives and the Afghan government remained conspicuously absent.

And perhaps just as obviously, the Taliban exploited the American interest in an exit, successfully keeping the Afghan government out of the negotiations concerning the withdrawal. The Americans opted for a timeline-based withdrawal rather than one contingent upon specific conditions that needed to be met; among these, the requirement that Afghan state institutions and security forces possess a sufficient capacity level to operate independently, as well as the establishment of an *Afghan peace agreement*. Throughout the Doha process, there was ambiguity and a lack of transparency, which allowed for various interpretations regarding whether the Americans truly intended to withdraw, and to what extent they emphasised the stipulated condition that the Taliban

engage in intra-Afghan dialogue before the Americans departed. This ambiguity led to the withdrawal appearing unprepared from the perspective of the Ghani government, but the UN and other NATO countries were also largely passive.

Finally, it is noted how overtures were made to the Taliban since 2011 – not only by the Americans but also by the neighbouring countries. This allowed the Taliban to expand their room for manoeuvre. Such expansion occurred due to the widening rift between the Americans and the regional actors, and because issues as varied as counterterrorism on their own territory, separatism, drug trafficking and infrastructure projects were prominent on the regional agenda. Notably, Pakistan, Iran, Russia and China adjusted their positions regarding the Taliban despite their initial support for the War on Terror. As the war progressed, the Taliban appeared to be an indispensable actor in the future of Afghanistan, prompting regional actors to compete for the role as mediator. Simultaneously, the emerging threat from IS became a greater concern for regional neighbours – as well as for the USA – than the Taliban's advance. At the extreme, the rise of ISIS actually rendered the Taliban an ally in the War on Terror.

The US War in Afghanistan: This chapter outlines how the entire course of the war was shaped by three critical American decisions made during the planning phase. Firstly, the decision regarding regime change was linked to choices about *how* to remove the Taliban (e.g., the number of troops to be deployed) and *what* would replace the Taliban in Kabul. In terms of the 'how' question, the answer ultimately became the deployment of a limited number of American forces on Afghan soil to remove the Taliban in collaboration with the Northern Alliance – militias that, as was fully understood, consisted of warlords with a brutal history and conduct. The operation succeeded surprisingly quickly, as the Taliban were fleeing Kabul by November 2001. In response, the Northern Alliance moved in, which had a decisive influence on the 'what' question; namely, who would take power in Kabul after the Taliban, since the warlords had already seized control of key power bases. This situation made it impossible for successive Afghan governments to act effectively and with legitimacy throughout the war. Another crucial decision during the first phase of the war was that the Americans chose to abdicate responsibility for building a new regime; the argument being that the US did not want to take responsibility for nation-building. This placed the Americans in a persistent dilemma: On one hand, the Bush administration did not wish to commit to nation-building; on the other, the US aimed to be the dominant actor in military and security developments, which continuously pulled the US into the very nation-building process it sought to avoid, as this was perceived to be the path to creating security and combating terrorism. This resulted in ongoing tension between a unilateral American approach and multilateral international cooperation. Throughout the war, the US shifted its military strategy repeatedly, attempting to adjust and rectify the negative consequences of decisions made during the planning phase.

In addition to enduring legitimacy challenges, the chapter highlights how the USA ‘magnified’ the enemy by adopting a regime-change strategy aimed at removing the Taliban. This elevated the Taliban to ‘principal adversary’ status, which was a far greater concern than merely combating terrorism. The attempts at eliminating the Taliban blurred the distinction between it and al-Qaeda, leading to the establishment of a well-entrenched insurgency movement as the main enemy. The lack of differentiation and the initial decisions reflected a notable knowledge deficit, particularly regarding al-Qaeda’s capabilities and the al-Qaeda–Taliban connections in the aftermath of 9/11. Since 2011, and with the initiation of negotiations with the Taliban, the Americans attempted to distinguish between the Taliban and the global terror threat. The course of events thus reflects a zigzag course, the US often acting unilaterally (especially in decisions regarding the organisation of the war and its exit) and drew on or excluded its partners (NATO, the UN, local militias, the Afghan government, regional actors) as it suited American interests. Consequently, American decisions – and American dominance – had a decisive impact on how the entire course of the war unfolded and concluded.

Military capacity building: This chapter describes the challenges involved in developing the military capacity of the ANDSF. The premise of this chapter is that the Afghan army did not possess the necessary capacity at the time of withdrawal, which meant that the Taliban could take over. The ANDSF also lacked the requisite capacity to assume security responsibilities in 2015; however, the transition occurred nonetheless despite evaluations at that time indicating that there was still a long way to go. The chapter outlines the fundamental challenges in military capacity building, particularly that efforts were aligned with short-term security interests, that international efforts lacked focus on sustainable institution-building and local ownership, and, finally, that the efforts were so fragmented that it remained unclear who truly was holding the ball and the overall responsibility.

The chapter describes how, prior to the initiation of the RSM in 2015, American priorities primarily dictated capacity building. From 2003 to 2006, ANDSF training focused on security creation in and around Kabul. As the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated, beginning around 2006, capacity building centred on enhancing the ability to manage internal insurgencies rather than on establishing institutions capable of ensuring long-term security and governance. During President Obama’s *troop surge* in the spring of 2010, the focus shifted to the tactical deployment of ANDSF forces against the Taliban. Subsequently, capacity building concentrated on enabling Afghan units to support and replace ISAF forces. Simultaneously, the Afghan National Police (ANP) was trained and deployed to combat insurgents or hold captured territory rather than to provide policing authority and protection for the local population. Notably, police training emphasised the ability to survive in the fight against the Taliban, while segments of the population – particularly in rural areas – increasingly viewed the ANP as a security challenge. Especially after 2009, the ANP was trained and used increasingly as a paramilitary

force. Fundamentally, the ANDSF was never developed to plan, conduct and/or sustain its own operations.

The chapter also outlines how, throughout all phases of the war, capacity building was short-term and fragmented. The divided responsibility for Security Sector Reform (SSR) and varying national perspectives on capacity building meant that, over the years, these efforts appeared fragmented and focused on too many short-term objectives. The initiatives generally appeared to represent a patchwork of uncoordinated approaches among the involved countries, as well as among different military units responsible for capacity building and private security companies. There was, therefore, no direct coordination between the initiatives, no central reporting mechanism, nor any focused effort within the SSR framework. An unclear division of responsibilities and tasks between NATO, the USA and the other contributing countries lay behind the numerous challenges.

Despite the stated intentions, capacity-building efforts did not entail Afghan ownership. It was only with RSM in 2015 that capacity building became centred on a genuine reform of Afghan security sector organisations based on Afghan ownership. Nevertheless, military capacity building was only minimally grounded in well-known local conditions, such as low educational levels and high degrees of corruption and clientelism. Instead, training periods were continuously shortened to meet political agreements regarding troop numbers – a benchmark focused on quantity rather than quality. Consequently, RSM effectively assumed an impossible task, as the Afghan Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defence and the ANDSF authorities were all incapable – after 14 years of training – of leading the development of their own security sectors. To strengthen the ANDSF ahead of negotiations with the Taliban, the USA increased training efforts for tactical units outside of NATO and RSM. From 2018 onwards, NATO's training and advising primarily occurred through rapid response teams that trained the ANDSF during cease-fire periods. As soon as the Taliban intensified their attacks on Afghan bases and checkpoints, NATO training teams consistently withdrew from the Afghan security forces due to restrictive national mandates. Consequently, the ANDSF capacity building was challenged by each country's limitations on the deployment of their units, low training and advising standards, lack of local knowledge and experience among the deployed trainers and advisers, the length of the respective countries' deployment periods, and uneven rotations among countries. This resulted in a lack of continuity and an absence of learning, transfer and knowledge sharing within and between the contributing nations.

The chapter demonstrates how the way capacity building was organised and assessed over the years did not account for how the ANDSF had become deeply reliant on NATO and the US, particularly with respect to American leadership, fire support and logistics. From the outset, the ANDSF was structured according to the organisation, doctrine and equipment of the US Army, which Afghanistan's socio-economic conditions, culture and traditions could not sustain. The capacity building and the pace of the transfer of security responsibility were guided by American interests rather than the actual circumstances in Afghanistan and ANDSF competency levels. Consequently, when the US withdrew its advisory support and,

particularly, its air support in mid-2021, the ANDSF collapsed within a matter of weeks.

Civilian capacity building: The chapter describes the challenges associated with civilian capacity-building efforts. Like military capacity building, civilian capacity building should ideally have served as a bulwark against the Taliban and their legitimacy. However, the chapter highlights the paradoxical development whereby large segments of the civilian effort operated counter to the intended purpose: Rather than enhancing capacity, they contributed to the perception that the weak Afghan government was even less legitimate. Corruption and the political elite's pursuit of personal business interests through foreign aid were particularly problematic. What was supposed to be a long-term and well-coordinated international effort based on Afghan ownership and pace instead materialised as a series of disparate and often uncoordinated initiatives. Rather than a 20-year effort, it resembled 20 one-year initiatives with frequently shifting priorities. Although economic sustainability, local ownership and the legitimisation of the Afghan central government were embedded in the initial agreements on civilian development, specific donor interests, the deteriorating security situation, increasing corruption and administrative incompetence meant that the initiatives were characterised by the opposite: Short-sightedness, management according to external agendas and diminished support for the Afghan central government. The most significant challenge for the civilian efforts was the ongoing need for security; over time, local needs and Afghan ownership became increasingly marginalised.

The chapter illustrates that the initiatives became extremely supply-driven over time due to the national priorities of the contributing countries. This was similarly the case for the work of NGOs, which often competed for the same resources and had specific priorities. As persistent corruption challenges led to the majority of civilian aid being distributed outside the central government, the overall picture was that Afghan ownership and demand defined very little in relation to the external actors' agendas. The chapter further elucidates how civilian aid was employed as a tool to generate support for the central government but paradoxically led to the opposite outcome. The volume of funds exceeded aid standards, and excessive money in circulation contributed to sustaining and exacerbating corruption.

Moreover, the chapter describes how continuous security issues presented a fundamental challenge, thus defining civilian efforts since the Taliban 'came back' after 2005. Consequently, the civilian initiative was characterised by short-term thinking. Some of these efforts consisted of so-called *Quick Impact Projects* (QIPs), which were intended to create legitimacy (and security) for international security forces. Despite ideals regarding better-coordinated stabilisation efforts, the interplay in the Afghan context ultimately meant that civilian initiatives had to support military security creation. Initially, military security creation was to support civilian initiatives coordinated through the Afghan government. However, following NATO's expansion into eastern and southern

Afghanistan in 2006, civilian efforts increasingly became supportive of military initiatives. Funds were deployed in the most unstable areas and coordinated directly by the units present in the operational areas. This reinforced the short-term focus and further undermined the ability of the Afghan government to provide its own solutions.

Over the course of 20 years, the efforts of the many contributing nations were defined by specific developmental policy agendas. Development projects within the operational areas of the involved countries often served as a domestic political lever to extend military contributions. Concurrently, contributing countries increasingly utilised their own national NGOs and their local Afghan branches, with several private firms eventually being employed as subcontractors for development efforts and the security surrounding them. As this privatisation and outsourcing of civilian efforts progressed, the Afghan government became increasingly less capable of delivering services, while corruption and nepotism continued to pervade the Afghan bureaucracy.

Notes

- 1 Statement, President Joe Biden, The White House (2021), 'Remarks by President Biden on the drawdown of U.S. forces in Afghanistan', 8 July.
- 2 *Al-Jazeera* (2021), 'Taliban seizes key districts in Afghanistan as gov't forces flee', 4 July.
- 3 *TRTWORLD* (2021), "'The Taliban have won': Afghan leader Ghani says he left to avoid bloodshed', 15 August.
- 4 Aaron Zelin (2023), *ISKP goes global: External operations from Afghanistan*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 11 September.
- 5 In August 2021, during the Taliban takeover and the fall of Kabul, approximately 120,000 people were evacuated, 2,000 of whom were NATO-employed Afghans. *NATO* (2022), *NATO and Afghanistan*.
- 6 Danish veterans from the War in Afghanistan also experienced severe symptoms of PTSD and depression, as concluded by a study based on ISAF Task Force 7, which was deployed in 2009 to Helmand Province and the city of Gereshk. ISAF 7 was engaged in intense combat, both north and south of the city in the so-called green zone, and the unit lost several colleagues along the way. *OLFI* (2017), 'Voksende antal veteraner fra Afghanistan får PTSD og depression', 8 April.
- 7 *Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University* (2021), *Costs of war*.
- 8 *Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University* (2023), *Pakistani civilians*.
- 9 According to the U.S. Department of Defense, a total of 832,000 Americans were deployed to Afghanistan over the 20-year period. At the height of its involvement, NATO had over 130,000 troops in Afghanistan from 50 countries. In addition, numerous diplomats, aid workers and journalists have been deployed during this time. Constanze Stelzenmüller (2021), *The war in Afghanistan has shaped an entire generation in the West*, Brookings, 2 September.
- 10 *Watson Institute, Costs of war*.
- 11 *House of Commons Library* (2021), *Afghanistan statistics: UK deaths, casualties, mission costs and refugees*.
- 12 Tone Tingsgård (2017), 'Sverige i Afghanistan 2002–2014', *Statens offentliga utredningar*, p. 28.

- 13 Bjørn T. Godal et al. (2016), 'En god alliert – Norge i Afghanistan 2001–2014', Norges offentlige utredninger, 6 June.
- 14 This is based on responses to questions put to the ministers on 20 August 2021 and therefore does not include costs associated with the evacuation in 2021. Over the 20-year period, development assistance amounted to approximately DKK 7.3 billion, civilian–military efforts accounted for around DKK 267 million, and funding for initiatives in Afghanistan totalled DKK 655 million. Contributions related to refugees through UN organisations, along with funds disbursed through strategic partnership agreements with Danish civil society organisations, amounted to approximately DKK 1 billion in total. Of this, funding for Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries amounted to DKK 314.4 million, while the figure for initiatives in Afghanistan was DKK 655.3 million. In comparison, Denmark spent approximately DKK 6.4 billion on efforts in Iraq from spring 2003 to 2021. Minister of Defence – Denmark (2021), *Forsvarsudvalget FOU Alm. del - endeligt svar på spørgsmål 257*, Folketinget; Folketinget (2021), *Udenrigsudvalget (URU) Alm. del: Spørgsmål 407*, Folketinget.
- 15 Our meetings have been of an informal character, and the background meetings have enabled us to participate in discussions that have provided a better understanding of certain issues. No one is directly included as a data source.
- 16 The War in Afghanistan exemplifies a conflict that consisted in reality of a series of conflict bundles and is therefore particularly challenging to analyse as a singular event. Any representation of the course of the war will always be a simplification, as it is based on some actors more than others. The central conflict in Afghanistan was consistently difficult to identify clearly, and the involved actors all had their own versions of what the conflict was about. Conflict bundles are defined as 'conflicts taking place simultaneously at multiple levels, with local, regional, global actors who have had a stake in the conflicts ... implying not only globalization processes or conflict-extension (a widening of the battlefield), but a proliferation of conflicts along different dimensions'. Mona Sheikh (2022), 'Transnational jihad as a bundled conflict-constellation', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, special issue.
- 17 Please refer to the online support material for a timeline for the war in Afghanistan, 2001–2021. Available at www.routledge.com/9781041100188

2 The Taliban

Their Strength and Strategy

Introduction

This chapter describes the Taliban's strength and strategy in the period 2001–21. Their strength is evaluated based on three indicators: Combat activity, territorial control and local governance. The latter is referred to as 'shadow governments', because the Taliban's structures existed alongside the Afghan governmental frameworks. In some instances, these structures *replaced* the formal Afghan government institutions, which renders the term rather imprecise but operational. The section on the Taliban's shadow governments is primarily based on research literature and reports, while the first two indicators of the Taliban's strength (combat activity and territorial control) rely on quantitative data to a larger extent.

We start this description of the Taliban's strength by clarifying what is known about their attack patterns, their territorial influence and control, and the locations of their consolidated shadow governments. This establishes the basis for the subsequent chapters, which will address both the responses to this development and factors that may help to explain the evolution of the Taliban's overall strength. The chapter comprises a descriptive section that first outlines how the Taliban evolved over the entire period, followed by a second part, based on existing research literature, reports and intelligence assessments, that identifies three 'movement-specific' explanations for this development. The three explanations focus on:

- The Taliban's strategic adaptability
- The Taliban's integration with the Haqqani network
- The Taliban's exploitation of the central government's weaknesses, particularly the legitimacy challenges it struggled with outside of Kabul

The chapter begins with a description of the Taliban's emergence and ideological roots. The Taliban's ideology is part of the explanation for its continued ability to mobilise and recruit over the course of 20 years despite significant losses along the way.¹

Background: The history and ideological roots of the Taliban

The Taliban were established as a movement in 1994,² by which time Afghanistan had already been ravaged by war for 15 years. The former Soviet Union invaded

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Afghanistan in 1979, and during the period of Soviet presence, the United States, together with countries such as Saudi Arabia, supported the so-called *mujahideen* movements, which were resistance groups fighting against the Soviet occupation.³ Ideologically, the *mujahideen* movements were multifaceted, comprising factions inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood as well as secular and Shia Muslim groups. Ethnically, the *mujahideen* movements were also diverse, led by prominent Pashtun, Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara leaders, each with their own command structure.

When the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan at the end of the Cold War in 1989, 1.5 million Afghans had lost their lives.⁴ Only three years later, Afghan President Mohammad Najibullah's government was overthrown, and Kabul was seized by various *mujahideen* factions; this time not as a movement with a common goal. Kabul was taken by the northern *mujahideen* factions, which included the infamous Rashid Dostum's Uzbek-led forces and Burhanuddin Rabbani's Tajik-dominated faction, including his prominent commander Ahmad Shah Masood, who later came to lead the Northern Alliance.⁵ This was significant because Kabul was now controlled by predominantly non-Pashtuns despite Pashtuns constituting the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and having historically held a leading role in Afghan politics.⁶

Between 1992 and 1994, Afghanistan was marked by civil war, with rival factions controlling small parts of the country. In the southern, Pashtun-dominated areas, including Kandahar (where the Taliban's religious leadership is now based), as well as in most other parts of the country, the civilian population experienced a particularly high degree of insecurity, arbitrary expropriation, theft, sexual violence and various other crimes committed by those often referred to in history books as 'warlords' – a term encompassing both armed militias and their criminal networks. This led to significant refugee flows both within Afghanistan's borders and to refugee camps in neighbouring Pakistan.⁷

In 1994, a number of former Pashtun commanders from southern Afghanistan, including Mullah Omar (the first and long-standing supreme leader of the Taliban), Mullah Baradar and Mullah Ghaus (who later became the Taliban foreign minister), decided to form a new organisation. Their declared objective was to bring peace to Afghanistan and disarm the militias, but also to enforce sharia-based law and protect what they considered to be Afghanistan's Islamic identity.⁸ The term 'Taliban', meaning 'students', was associated with a following of refugees and students from religious schools (*madrassas*) in Pakistan's northwestern frontier province, particularly from the madrasa Darul Uloom Haqqania in Peshawar.⁹

The Taliban distinguished themselves ideologically from other Afghan Islamist groups, who were inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East, instead drawing on ideological references from the 19th-century Deobandi movement,¹⁰ which was characterised by its opposition to British influence and imperialism in India.¹¹ The Taliban constitute a conservative and puritanical movement seeking to return to what it considers a more original and authentic form of Islam.¹² They identify as Sunni Muslims and claim to interpret Islam in accordance with the Sunni school of thought known as Hanafi, which approximately 80% of the Afghan population traditionally adheres to. Interestingly, the Hanafi tradition is sometimes

regarded as one of the most flexible interpretations of Islam, because it incorporates 'social context' as a consideration in religious interpretations alongside the primary sources of law (the Qur'an and the words and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad).¹³

With support from Pakistan's military intelligence, the Taliban managed to seize large parts of southern Afghanistan and capture weapon depots from mid-1994 onwards. At the time, Pakistan's interest was partly to restore peace and stability in neighbouring Afghanistan and to establish a friendly government that recognised the borders (the Durand Line) between the two countries, as well as to prevent factions that were more sympathetic to its arch-rival India from gaining a foothold. By November 1994, the Taliban had taken control of the major southern Afghan city of Kandahar and began to levy taxes. An estimated 12,000 Afghan and Pakistani students joined the Taliban in Kandahar in 1994. Within three months, the Taliban gained control over 12 of Afghanistan's 31 provinces.¹⁴ In those early months, the Taliban often faced little to no resistance, as many local commanders surrendered without a fight.¹⁵

In 1996, Mullah Omar was proclaimed Amir al-Mu'mineen (Leader of the Faithful) at a grand assembly in Kandahar attended by thousands of Pashtun leaders who pledged their allegiance. This title not only established him as the undisputed leader of the Taliban but also sought to position him as the purported leader of Muslims worldwide. On 4 April, he donned what was purported to be the Prophet Muhammad's sacred cloak, which had been taken from a shrine in Kandahar for the first time in 60 years, further cementing his leadership status among the region's fighters.¹⁶

After months of fierce fighting, the Taliban succeeded in capturing Kabul in September 1996, giving them de facto control over Afghanistan. Less than 24 hours after taking the city, they banned women from working despite one-quarter of Kabul's public sector, its entire primary education system, and most of the health-care system predominantly being operated by women. They also ordered the immediate closure of all schools and secondary schools for girls while introducing guidelines for women's clothing. Alongside these prohibitions came the imposition of a range of publicly enforced punishments (e.g. stoning, amputations) together with various other restrictions, including bans on television, gambling and music.¹⁷

In 1996, the Taliban marked their takeover of power when former President Najibullah was killed and his body hung from a lamppost for public display.¹⁸ The Taliban's hardline approach towards warlords and other criminal groups meant that the Afghan population experienced less warfare – and more stability – in the years leading up to the US-led invasion in 2001. This obviously only applied to societal groups that were not persecuted; for example, the Hazara minority suffered enormously under the first Taliban government, as did women, who experienced a significant loss of freedoms.¹⁹

Following the Taliban incursion into Kabul in 1996, the movement controlled 90% of the country, while the remaining 10% in northern Afghanistan was held by an alliance of some of the former resistance groups that the US had supported in the fight against the Soviet Union. In December of that year, they formed the Northern Alliance (United Islamic National Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan), which

was ethnically dominated by Tajiks and Uzbeks. Internationally, the Northern Alliance was recognised as the legitimate representative of Afghanistan, meaning that it held Afghanistan's seat at the United Nations and thus represented the country in the international community.²⁰

The first Taliban government was only recognised by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates. This international isolation resulted in Afghanistan facing a devastating economic situation in those years, with limited trade and contact with the outside world.²¹ In *Forbidden Truth* (2002), Jean-Charles Brisard and Guillaume Dasquie describe how both the Clinton and Bush administrations negotiated with the Taliban regime to persuade them to establish a more inclusive government representing all of Afghanistan, as well as to view favourably American companies' attempts to establish an oil and gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan.²² At that time, there was also a UN mandate aimed at bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table, but this was dissolved following the al-Qaeda attack on the USS *Cole* in 2000.

The American dialogue with the Taliban in the late 1990s was sporadic, primarily led by American oil companies. However, even after the al-Qaeda attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, contact was maintained. In the first half of 2001, the White House even intensified its efforts to communicate with the Taliban, and several Taliban officials were invited to Washington in March 2001. The agenda focused on the extradition of bin Laden as well as improving American companies' access to oil reserves in Central Asia. When the negotiations stalled in July 2001, there were reports that a representative of the Bush administration had threatened the Taliban with military reprisals if the government did not comply with American demands. The last publicly known meeting between the US and Taliban representatives took place in August 2001, just five weeks before the 9/11 attacks, when US Assistant Secretary of State for Central Asian Affairs Christina Rocca met with the Taliban ambassador in Pakistan.²³ The primary US interest was in the tracking and neutralisation of Osama bin Laden.²⁴

There was support in the UN Security Council for the adoption of two resolutions concerning Afghanistan, the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The first, in 1999, was a resolution that represented a direct response to al-Qaeda's terrorism against two American embassies in East Africa in 1998: The resolution sanctioned al-Qaeda, the Taliban and a long list of named individuals. Following 9/11, this became the UN's terrorism list. The second resolution, passed in 2000, tightened sanctions, particularly against the Taliban, who were still recognised as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan by only three countries (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan).²⁵

In the autumn of 2001, when the Taliban had been in power for just over five years, four simultaneous terrorist attacks took place in the US, resulting in approximately 3,000 deaths and an even higher number of injuries. A group of 19 hijackers took control of four airplanes, flying two of them into each of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York, one into the Pentagon (the US Department of Defense), while the fourth hijacked plane, otherwise headed to Washington D.C., crashed in a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The attacks on 11 September 2001 were planned and orchestrated by a small group around Osama bin Laden,

then leader of al-Qaeda, who aimed to compel the US to withdraw its military bases from Muslim countries.²⁶ Al-Qaeda, including key figures in bin Laden's circle, operated openly from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, where the organisation also had training camps. From these camps, bin Laden recruited and partially trained the hijackers behind the 9/11 attacks.

It later emerged that Taliban leader Mullah Omar opposed Bin Laden's plans to attack the United States and unsuccessfully attempted to persuade him to focus on despots in Muslim countries instead.²⁷ Following the attacks, Bush issued the Taliban an ultimatum to hand over bin Laden to the United States, which the Taliban leadership quickly rejected, instead demanding further evidence of his involvement in the attacks.²⁸ A few weeks later, on 7 October 2001, the USA, with British support, launched airstrikes in Afghanistan. The Taliban lost control of Kabul by 13 November 2001 and were finally considered defeated after losing their last stronghold in Kandahar by early December.²⁹

The Taliban movement – A brief overview

The Taliban were established in 1994 in southern Afghanistan, primarily mobilising support among Afghan refugees in Pakistan's border provinces. The founders of the movement had previously been part of the *mujahideen* factions that fought against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan during the Cold War. Ideologically, the Taliban can be characterised as part of the Deobandi tradition, a religious school rooted in Muslim resistance thought dating back to British colonial rule in 19th-century India. In addition to their anti-colonialist self-understanding, they consider themselves representatives of 'authentic Islam' and are, in this regard, puritanical. They seek for their ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam and sharia to play a central role in the organisation of the state and society, and they designate Afghanistan as an Islamic Emirate, also using this term to describe themselves. Between 1996 and 2001, the Taliban governed most of Afghanistan, which they managed to take control over following the 10-year Soviet–Afghan War (1979–89) and a period of civil war (1989–96). Although often referred to in the singular, the movement in fact comprises several factions that have periodically opposed one another. The Taliban were overthrown in 2001 shortly after the events of 9/11, when they refused to extradite Osama bin Laden to the Americans. In August 2021, they regained power after 20 years of armed conflict.

The development of the Taliban 2001–21

In the following, we outline the evolution of the Taliban's combat capabilities, their territorial influence and control, and the establishment of local administrations (shadow governments) in the years 2001–21. This consolidated overview has

not been conducted previously and takes into account both the Taliban's capacity as an armed actor and their use of 'soft power'.

Combat capability and armed attacks

Our analysis of the Taliban's combat capability is based on a chronological framework organised around significant events.³⁰ We measure combat capability based on the number and intensity of armed attacks attributed to the group, with the data obtained from the Georeferenced Events Dataset (GED) of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP).³¹

UCDP as data source

The GED dataset contains so-called geo-coded event-based data on armed conflicts, including in Afghanistan for the entire period from October 2001 to August 2021. Its large temporal scope sets it apart from other major data sources that only cover data for limited timeframes, such as the Armed Conflict Location and Events Data (ACLED), which only has data from 2017 onwards. UCDP codes its datasets based on news media coverage (both Afghan and international) and other sources, including government statements, reports from international or regional organisations, and local NGOs. It should be noted that the data foundation relies on whether an attack is attributed to the Taliban or not, which can initially be challenging to verify. One advantage is that UCDP is solely based on publicly available information, meaning that the information was also accessible to political decision-makers at the given times throughout the period. However, it is important to mention that the attacks attributed to the Taliban, particularly in the first years after 2001, were influenced by other armed actors' tendency to not claim responsibility for their attacks. The Taliban, in turn, readily took responsibility for these attacks, as doing so signalled power (see, e.g., a Crisis Group report from 2006, *Countering Afghanistan's insurgency: No quick fixes*, pp. 12–13).

It is also worth noting that there are underreported fatalities on the coalition forces' side in the years following 2013 – the period when security responsibility was transferred from ISAF to the ANDSF. UCDP data are less accurate from this point onwards. For example, without citing a specific data source, a Crisis Group report from May 2014 mentioned 2013 as the first year in the conflict in which the Taliban inflicted roughly as many casualties on the ANDSF as they themselves suffered. However, this trend is not reflected in the UCDP data. The primary reason for this discrepancy likely lies in underreporting by the Afghan government. Shortly after

ISAF transferred security responsibility to the Afghan government during the summer of 2013, the Afghan government ceased to regularly report fatalities related to government forces. Although the Afghan Ministry of the Interior had previously provided daily battlefield reports, such information was later supplied only in separate reports from local government officials (and in a less comprehensive form). In contrast, Taliban reports on their inflicted casualties on Afghan forces were typically exaggerated, and the UCDP therefore did not use it systematically for data coding. Consequently, the UCDP casualty figures for ANDSF after 2013 are expected to be significantly lower than the actual casualty figures. Despite these limitations, the UCDP data generally align with qualitative reporting from various other sources.

The first phase (2001–04)

The first phase encompasses the period during which the Taliban began to reorganise and consult internally to initiate an insurgency.³² This phase is characterised by low activity levels, which can be attributed to the significant losses the Taliban suffered because of the US-led military intervention in October 2001. An estimated 20% of Taliban fighters were killed by 2002, while their core leadership, including Mullah Omar, had fled to Quetta in Pakistan.³³ Overall, the attacks carried out in this period occurred in relative isolation from one another and were primarily concentrated in the southern provinces.³⁴

Reports from 2004 indicate that most of the Taliban recruitment during this period took place in refugee camps around Quetta, from where new recruits were subsequently sent across the border to carry out attacks.³⁵ Particularly towards the end of this initial phase in 2004, the Taliban were increasingly portrayed as a significant threat.³⁶

The second phase (2005–09)

During this phase, the Taliban underwent a consolidation process. They expanded their insurgency campaign, and the first code of conduct (*layha*), which specified the guidelines for their warfare, was introduced. In the final months of 2005, the Taliban attacks grew considerably in number, particularly characterised by a massive increase in suicide attacks and remote-controlled bombs.³⁷ In 2006, the Taliban were described as a serious security threat.³⁸

During this period, the Taliban expanded their operations, conducting attacks not only in the south and east, but also in the capital, Kabul. In the south, the increase in violence can be partially explained by the expansion of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), as exemplified by the deployment of 3,000 troops in Helmand province.³⁹ The Taliban's ability to seek refuge across the

Afghan–Pakistani border was highlighted as a crucial factor facilitating their armed activities in Afghanistan.⁴⁰

The Taliban became active in areas where they had not previously been established;⁴¹ instead, other armed groups, such as commanders from Jamiat-e-Islami and Hezb-e-Islami, had dominated the military landscape in these areas. The Taliban's expansion westward in these years has been partially attributed to their ability to collaborate with local leaders and to recruit fighters from among them.⁴² Although there was an increase in violence, attacks resulting in high casualties remained relatively rare; notable incidents did occur, however, such as a major suicide bombing targeting a military bus in Kabul in 2007 and a massacre of bus passengers on the Kandahar–Helmand highway in 2008.⁴³

The third phase (2010–13)

This phase begins after the Americans decided to increase troop numbers in 2009: the 'surge'. During this period, there was a significant increase in Taliban attacks against coalition forces. The surge enabled the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and their international partners to intensify pressure on the Taliban, particularly in the south in Kandahar and Helmand, where dozens of high-ranking Taliban commanders were killed or captured. However, despite suffering heavy losses in their traditional strongholds, the Taliban were also able to retaliate and continue to strike their opponents.

In November 2010, a report from the International Crisis Group concluded that the increased number of Western troops had neither managed to disrupt the Taliban's momentum nor enhance stability on the ground.⁴⁴ The report also noted a nationwide rise in the use of so-called 'improvised explosive devices' (IEDs).⁴⁵ However, ISAF pointed to a decrease in Taliban attacks against international and Afghan forces, which was highlighted as a success. Other experts criticised this claim,⁴⁶ particularly because May 2011 recorded the highest number of civilian casualties in a single month since the US-led invasion in 2001.⁴⁷

In October 2012, another International Crisis Group report concluded that, despite the increase in troop numbers, ISAF had ultimately failed to displace the Taliban from their primary strongholds in the south and east.⁴⁸ Similarly, pessimistic conclusions regarding the surge were drawn by experts from the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN). For instance, although the surge led to the killing of many Taliban commanders, it was emphasised that the Taliban were able to quickly replace them.⁴⁹ Taliban attacks in the first quarter of 2013 increased by nearly 50% compared to the same period the previous year, and hopes for fewer Taliban attacks increasingly appeared unrealistic.⁵⁰

As the Taliban faced significant pressure in their traditional strongholds from 2010 to 2013, they simultaneously expanded their operations into other areas. On one hand, there were large increases in Taliban-claimed attacks in central and eastern provinces and in Kabul;⁵¹ on the other, the number of NATO troops stationed in these provinces was described as inadequate to counter the Taliban attacks.⁵²

During this phase, there was also a marked increase in Taliban attacks in the north and northeast. The Taliban infiltrated new areas and tailored their efforts by systematically recruiting non-Pashtuns. The rising levels of violence were also resulting from clashes between the new Taliban units and ANDSF forces. Concurrently, they were also a consequence of international troop activity and how the US special operations forces began escalating their anti-Taliban operations, particularly in Kunduz and Baghlan.⁵³ This period also saw a significant rise in the number of casualties per attack, according to UCDP data, thus indicating improvements in the Taliban's operational capabilities.

The fourth phase (2014–17)

This phase was influenced by the formal transfer of security responsibility from ISAF to the ANDSF in June 2013, as well as the emergence of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) as the Taliban's new jihadist rival from January 2015 onwards.⁵⁴ In late 2014, President Barack Obama announced the conclusion of the US combat mission in Afghanistan, and when he transferred the presidency to Donald Trump in January 2017, only 9,800 American troops remained in the country.⁵⁵ The number of Taliban attacks increased significantly thereafter, particularly in the northern and northeastern provinces.⁵⁶ The Taliban shifted their tactics from predominantly asymmetric attacks (targeting selected objectives) towards more frequent engagement in ground battles.⁵⁷ With the reduced presence of foreign troops, the Taliban were now able to assemble larger groups of fighters, enabling them to challenge Afghan security forces in combat.⁵⁸ As early as mid-2013, it was noted that the Taliban could gather groups of several hundred fighters to assault district centres in rural areas.⁵⁹

The Taliban's armed confrontations with ISKP were a notable development during this period. Clashes between the two groups occurred across various parts of the country.⁶⁰ Internal conflicts also arose within the Taliban itself. From 2015 onwards, there were violent confrontations in Herat between the Taliban and a breakaway faction led by Mullah Mohammad Rasool Akhund, which referred to itself as the 'High Council of Afghanistan Islamic Emirate'.⁶¹ During the same period, the Taliban conducted a series of major operations aimed at capturing large cities, including a temporarily successful takeover of Kunduz in 2015, an attempted recapture of the city in 2016, and deadly assaults on provincial capitals in Ghazni and Farah in 2018. Regarding the seizure of Kunduz, David Kilcullen emphasised its highly professional execution by 'professional full-time fighters, put through rigorous training by experienced instructors in the camps in Pakistan, with uniforms, vehicles, heavy weapons, encrypted radios, and a formal command structure'.⁶² These operations reflected their increased military strength, despite their inability to maintain control of these cities for extended periods due to airstrikes from international forces and ground counter-offensives. Nevertheless, this undermined the Afghan government narrative that it was capable of ensuring civilian security in major cities.⁶³ Numerous alarming reports were published during this period; for instance, the UN Security Council

reported a record high number of armed clashes in September 2017, measured on a national scale.⁶⁴ While data from this period clearly indicated an increase in Taliban attacks, there is also reason to believe that the actual increase may have been even higher, as reporting was no longer conducted in the same manner as previously.

Final phase from 2018–August 2021

This period marks the lead-up to the Taliban's return to power. From 2018 onwards, the Taliban offensives became increasingly noticeable, albeit with brief periods of decreased intensity. During this final phase, the number of fatalities caused by the Taliban surged in several provinces.⁶⁵ The intensity of the individual attacks also increased, resulting in higher casualty counts per incident; in January 2018, for example, the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul was attacked using an explosives-laden vehicle disguised as an ambulance, resulting in 130 civilian deaths.⁶⁶

While there was another noticeable spike in violence in the months following US President Joe Biden's announcement of a troop withdrawal in April 2021, the Taliban offensives had already intensified in 2018. While there were temporary drops in the levels of violence, such as during a ceasefire around the *Eid al-Fitr* holiday in June 2018, hope was quickly dashed by a subsequent series of brutal Taliban attacks.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, the frequency of US and Afghan airstrikes against the Taliban reached unprecedented levels in 2017 and 2018 as part of the new Trump administration strategy to pressure the Taliban to the negotiating table.⁶⁸ Even after both parties had signed the withdrawal agreement in February 2020, the Taliban launched attacks against coalition forces immediately thereafter.⁶⁹ The number of Taliban attacks on civilians also increased dramatically in the weeks following the collapse of the intra-Afghan dialogue process in September 2020.⁷⁰

Table 2.1 illustrates the evolution of Taliban combat capabilities, measured in terms of the number and intensity of lethal attacks attributed to the group. They reflect the distribution of the Taliban's various attack targets, an increased dispersion of provincial-level attack activities, and a general rise in the Taliban's attack capacity over the course of 20 years.

Territorial control

Different mappings of the Taliban's territorial control over the 20-year period have been produced by different experts. These visualisations differ significantly based on the underlying methodology and the phases they seek to illustrate. Following the drawdown of the international presence, uncertainty increased from 2014 onwards, as it became more challenging to obtain verified information from Taliban-controlled areas as well as from areas where active fighting was occurring.⁷¹ Any description, including this one, will therefore be fraught with uncertainty.

Table 2.1 Development of Taliban attack strength – Number of deaths caused by the Taliban

<i>Province</i>	<i>2001–04</i>	<i>2005–09</i>	<i>2010–13</i>	<i>2014–17</i>	<i>2018–21</i>
Badakhshan	0	13	106	213	510
Badghis	12	105	185	113	1,097
Baghlan	0	41	161	184	849
Balkh	0	5	32	248	802
Bamyan	0	0	17	3	16
Daikondi	0	13	18	0	251
Farah	21	309	244	401	1,017
Faryab	0	19	168	347	991
Ghazni	12	350	311	423	1,062
Ghowr	0	5	24	97	398
Helmand	60	1,077	995	1,650	669
Herat	0	102	276	310	994
Jowzjan	0	15	71	151	611
Kabul	5	197	142	350	305
Kandahar	115	1,089	698	633	985
Kapisa	0	41	65	55	144
Khowst	34	229	161	91	94
Kunar	8	224	235	150	70
Kunduz	0	73	282	414	1,561
Laghman	0	48	69	90	71
Logar	9	72	124	191	285
Nangarhar	4	87	209	398	311
Nimruz	17	117	86	122	219
Nurestan	3	80	88	55	17
Paktia	2	125	150	141	245
Paktika	24	165	155	175	134
Panjshir	0	1	1	0	0
Parwan	0	11	53	63	97
Samangan	0	2	6	14	229
Sar-e Pol	0	0	44	147	327
Takhar	0	4	31	99	915
Uruzgan	60	328	263	383	297
Wardak	0	90	239	106	390
Zabul	117	300	133	261	449
Total	503	5,337	5,842	8,078	16,412

Source: The authors' own calculations based on the UCDP Georeferenced Dataset (GED) Global version 24.1

Our account is based on two publicly available and frequently cited sources prior to the Taliban takeover in August 2021. The first source is the *Long War Journal (LWJ)*, a project led by Bill Roggio from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), a Washington-based think tank with a particular focus on US foreign policy and security. The other source is the quarterly Congressional reports published by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

(SIGAR). The SIGAR reports are based on unclassified data from NATO's Resolute Support Mission together with information from individual districts covering the period between November 2015 and October 2018.

2001–04: To begin with, nearly all provincial capitals were under the control of the Afghan government in early 2002, although *LWJ* estimated at that time that the Taliban had a 'moderate' degree of influence in seven provinces without enjoying full control over any.⁷² However, the International Crisis Group described significant portions of the south and east as inaccessible due to Taliban activity as early as May 2004.⁷³ At this stage, taking control of the cities was not a central Taliban objective.⁷⁴ Until 2004, Taliban activities were driven by autonomous units, the so-called *mahaz*.

2005–08: The Taliban strategy changed in July 2006 when they achieved brief control over district centres in Helmand, Zabul, Uruzgan and Farah.⁷⁵ By late 2006, the Taliban were significantly challenging the central government control in approximately one-third of the country.⁷⁶ Now, they were not only targeting district centres but also provincial capitals,⁷⁷ increasing their influence in most areas of the country. According to *LWJ*, the Taliban had some form of presence in all provinces except Daikondi, Bamyān and Panjshir. Territorial expansion during this period was carefully planned, typically by sending political representatives and clerics allied with the Taliban into new areas. Their aim was to establish relationships with the local population and to identify potential opponents.⁷⁸ At the military level, a key factor in the Taliban's territorial expansion in this period was their use of larger and more competent fighting units (the so-called *loy mahaz*).⁷⁹

2009–14: In early 2009, immediately prior to the US-led troop surge that commenced in December, the Taliban's territorial influence had increased significantly. As described in the section on the Taliban's combat capabilities, the surge did not impact the number of Taliban-attributed attacks. However, it did weaken the extent of their territorial control. By 2012, the government had re-established control over all seven provincial capitals that the Taliban had challenged in 2009.

Particularly significant for the Taliban were their setbacks in Helmand and Kandahar, where they were expelled from the provincial capitals and suffered substantial losses. This was attributed to the surge, which resulted in targeted killings and the capture of high-ranking Taliban leaders.⁸⁰ Although the Taliban maintained a presence in all the provinces in which they had operated in the preceding three years, the overall picture was one of diminishing influences.

The US-ISAF strategy changed under General Stanley McChrystal, who assumed command of ISAF in June 2009. His approach focused on securing the major cities while deprioritising anti-Taliban operations in rural areas.⁸¹ In response, the Taliban thereafter deprioritised efforts to retake district and provincial centres, at least until 2015.⁸²

***Long War Journal* and SIGAR as data sources**

The *Long War Journal* (*LWJ*) data are based on media reports, government documents and information from the Taliban. Bill Roggio describes the *LWJ* coding approach in two articles from 2016 and 2023 entitled ‘Analysis: US military assessment of Taliban control of Afghan districts is flawed’ and ‘Mapping Taliban control in Afghanistan’. The coding distinguishes between three categories of territorial control: ‘Taliban-controlled’ refers to districts where the Taliban were ‘administering a district, providing services and security, and also running the local courts’. ‘Contested’ encompasses areas in district centres or military bases under government control, where the Taliban otherwise controlled ‘large areas or all of the areas outside of the district center’ or had control over ‘several villages, mines and other resources’, managed prisons within the district, or otherwise administered parts of the district. Other districts were classified as government-controlled. The *LWJ* assessments became more precise after October 2017, as information about several districts was lacking until that time. *LWJ* also relies on reports from the NATO Resolute Support Mission (RSM) regarding territorial control. However, it has critiqued RSM’s data collection methods, asserting that it ‘continually downplayed the Taliban’s level of control as well as contested districts in its reporting’. Other researchers have also voiced this criticism.

The SIGAR reports include assessments of Taliban territorial control from November 2015 to October 2018. These assessments are based on information from the US military regarding NATO’s RSM. RSM ceased to collect district control data after this period, as such information was no longer deemed relevant. The specific methodology used by the US military to classify a district as either ‘government-controlled’, ‘government-influenced’, ‘Taliban-controlled’, ‘Taliban-influenced’ or ‘contested’ remains unclear. However, in a 2016 report, SIGAR noted that the US military informed them that RSM measured territorial control based on five so-called stability indicators: Governance, security, infrastructure, economy and communication. ‘Contested districts’ were also specified as referring to those with marginal insurgent impact. The RSM data have been criticised for being overly optimistic regarding the extent of Taliban territorial control, particularly as they categorise districts as ‘government-influenced’ rather than ‘contested’. Moreover, the Taliban’s own assessments differ significantly from the RSM assessments; for instance, the Taliban claimed in March 2017 to control nearly 10% of all districts and to have significant influence in an additional 15%. This combined percentage deviated substantially from the 11% that RSM designated as being under ‘insurgent influence/control’ in February 2017. The Taliban reported that 48% constituted contested areas, compared to the 29% reported by RSM.

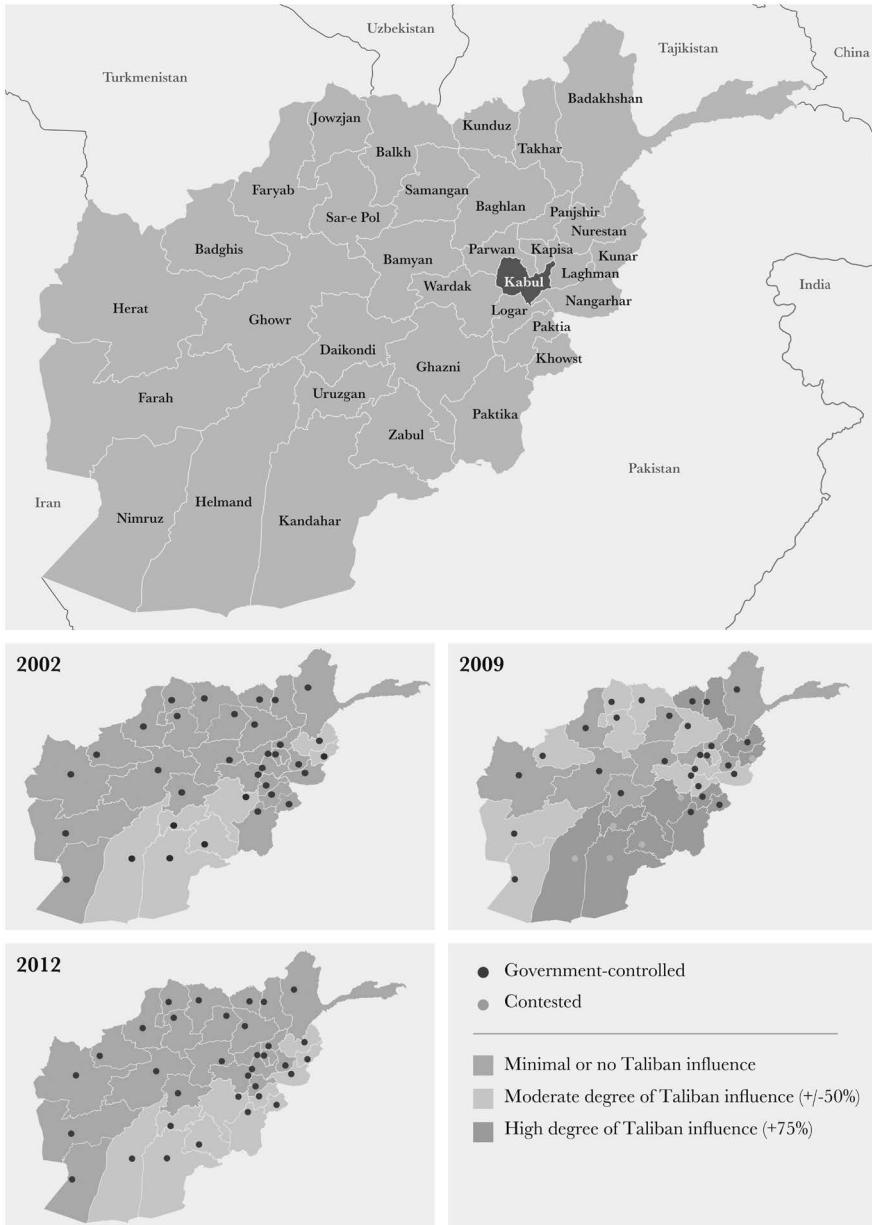
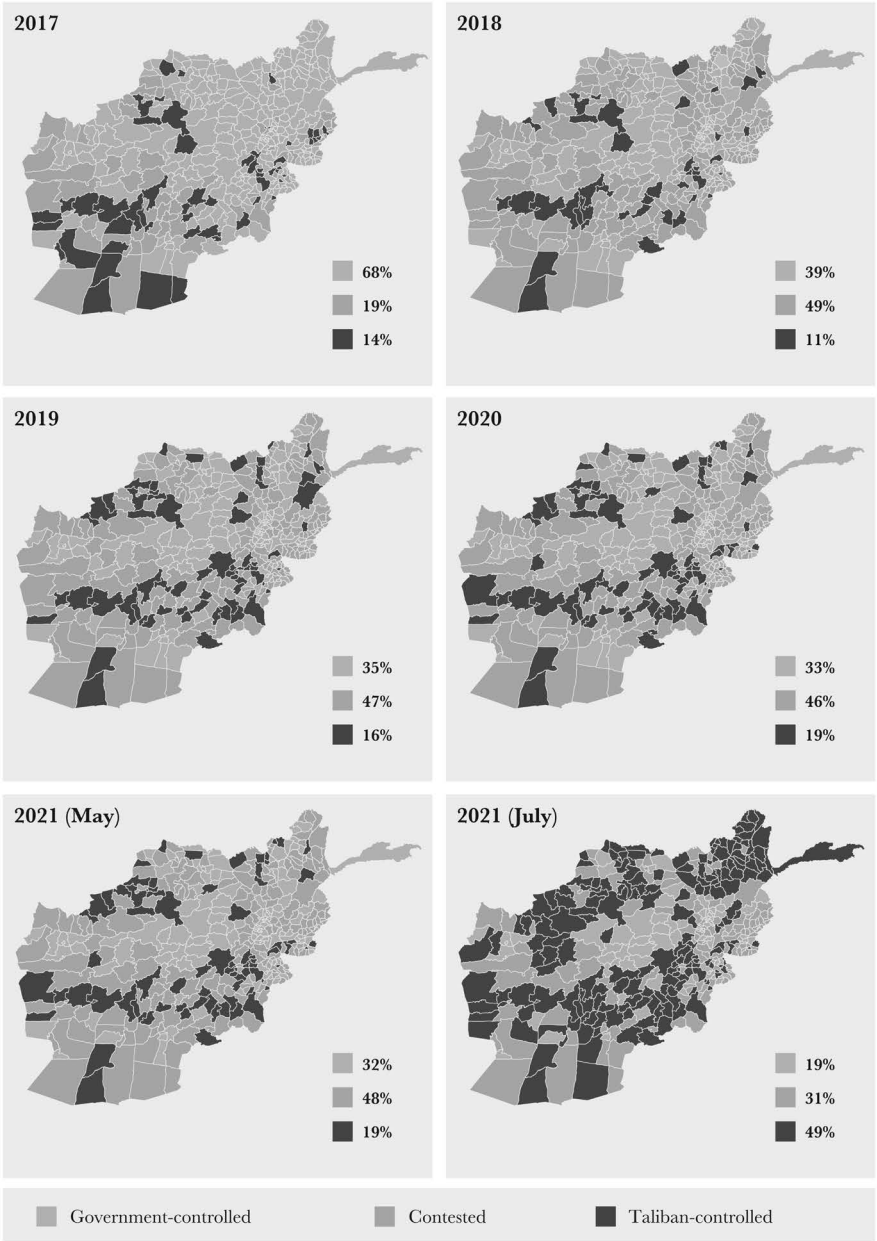


Figure 2.1 Taliban control of provinces 2002–2012



Source: Figure based on Roggio (2023), 'Mapping Taliban Control in Afghanistan'

Figure 2.2 Taliban control of districts 2017–2021

2015–21: In 2015, the Taliban began to capture and control several district centres, marking a new development.⁸³ Based on the number of contested and Taliban-controlled districts, the government control is estimated to have fallen by approximately 10% between 2015 and 2017.⁸⁴

Another notable trend is the significant increase in the number of contested districts during the period between October 2017 and May 2018, resulting in a marked decline in the proportion of both government- and Taliban-controlled districts. The *LWJ* assessment indicates that the number of contested districts increased by 31%. This temporary setback for the Taliban can be partially attributed to a shift in the Trump administration's strategy aimed at intensifying attacks against the Taliban and bolstering support for the ANDSF in order to pressure the Taliban leadership to engage in peace negotiations in Doha.⁸⁵

At the same time, the Taliban increasingly challenged the government-controlled districts.⁸⁶ From 2018 to 2020, the number of Taliban-controlled districts doubled, while the number of contested districts remained high, indicating that the Taliban continued to focus on expansion across most of the country. The situation began to change dramatically in May 2021, as the Taliban's control expanded significantly. The number of Taliban-controlled districts grew from 88 on 11 May to 104 by 16 June, and later to 199 by 7 July, just over a month before the takeover of Kabul in August 2021.

Shadow governments

The Taliban have collected taxes and influenced local affairs through various informal methods beyond militant insurgency. While territorial control required the Taliban to visibly occupy districts or entire provinces, shadow governance structures were often established prior to such territorial control. This does not necessarily imply that there were always well-functioning government structures for the Taliban to operate alongside; rather, their structures often filled certain gaps and functions that the sitting government was neglecting, or assumed roles that the group had previously held in local areas.⁸⁷

Looking back on the two decades between 2001 and 2021, the Taliban were frequently present in areas that were considered 'government-controlled'. When they later attempted to gain physical control over a district, they drew upon their existing support networks. As Ashley Jackson has summarised: 'Governance does not come after the capture of territory, but precedes it'.⁸⁸ However, there was also a dynamic operating in the opposite direction, as the extent of territorial control naturally led to a further expansion of Taliban governance.⁸⁹

How the Taliban governed varied from area to area. For example, Taliban governors in urban areas were more cautious about suppressing women's education compared to those in conservative rural areas.⁹⁰ Despite Taliban claims about having appointed governance commissions in 2003 for various sectors, including military, culture, finance and politics, it has been suggested that these likely existed primarily on paper only.⁹¹ Similarly, in the early years, the Taliban had few (if any) formal

policies in place to guide their interactions with civilians, as well as very few policies to direct their functioning as an insurgent group.⁹²

Mullah Omar's establishment of a ten-member leadership council (*shura*) in 2003 represented a significant early step. Among other things, it was intended to develop a political and military strategy while coordinating the activities of geographically dispersed mahaz fighting groups.⁹³ The year 2003 is often identified as the year when the Taliban began to mobilise and reorganise as an insurgent group.⁹⁴ To outline the chronological development of the Taliban shadow governance structures, this section is divided into three phases.⁹⁵

2005–08: During these years, Mullah Omar began issuing regular statements in celebration of the Muslim holiday of Eid. The first code of conduct (*layha*) for the Taliban was published in 2006. This document contained fundamental rules for fighters and specified the Taliban's ideological profile, emphasising the need for fighters to behave in accordance with Islam and highlighting their role in restoring 'true' Islamic values in society. The first *layha* also outlined the Taliban's command hierarchy. It has primarily been interpreted as a response from the Taliban leadership to issues of corruption and internal power struggles.⁹⁶

Although the initial *layha* was significant for the internal consolidation of the Taliban as an organisation, it still reflected more an anti-government strategy and less a strategy focused on addressing the needs of the population. The primary objective was to intimidate and attack government-controlled institutions.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, despite these attempts at internal consolidation, the Taliban were still being described as a disjointed organisation shaped by various subgroups with differing interests and motives for fighting under the shared Taliban banner.⁹⁸

During the same period, the development of shadow governance structures began to unfold. The Taliban appointed judges and established parallel judicial institutions.⁹⁹ Their assertion within the judicial sphere illustrates the importance they placed on playing a central role in local conflict resolution and mediation, while the introduction of what they saw as a correct interpretation of sharia-based legislation formed a core aspect of their political project. Although the Taliban later expanded their focus to other areas, their establishment of a justice infrastructure was typically the first service they offered to populations in the areas where they were present.¹⁰⁰

While the Taliban shadow government established and developed itself in the legal realm, the group's relationship with the education sector was largely hostile. Until 2009, the Taliban officially sanctioned the killing of teachers and destruction of schools.¹⁰¹ Such attacks faced public resistance from the population, who valued government services, particularly access to education for girls – which had increased during this period. Overall, the Taliban realised that the people were more accepting of their presence if they allowed government services to continue to function. In light of this, the Taliban revised their official code of conduct (*layha*) in 2009.¹⁰²

While educational facilities, predominantly government-operated, had been particularly vulnerable to Taliban attacks until the new guidelines were introduced in 2009, the Taliban had traditionally been more reluctant to target health centres, which

were often operated by NGOs. For instance, in 2007, the Taliban permitted the implementation of a major polio vaccination campaign led by the WHO and UNICEF.¹⁰³ An important explanation for their more accommodating approach to healthcare was the fact that the Taliban themselves utilised health facilities to treat their fighters. In several districts, there were reports of the Taliban coercing medical personnel to treat their own fighters before civilians who were awaiting treatment.¹⁰⁴

In sum, at the end of this first period, a clear trend from attacking civilian institutions towards coopting them had begun to emerge. Nevertheless, Taliban governance remained uncoordinated and ad hoc, characterised by regulations that varied significantly from district to district, often depending on individual commanders and the specific local context.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, there were differences in the degree to which the Taliban integrated into local communities.

2009–13: The Taliban further developed their military structures in the phase that followed. These changes were formalised in two revisions of the *layha* in 2009 and 2010, respectively. Already before the increased influx of Western troops, which accelerated with the surge from December 2009 onwards, the Taliban began appointing shadow governors at the provincial and district levels, primarily tasked with coordinating military activities and reporting back to the Taliban's overarching military commission but also taking responsibility for civilian affairs in the group's areas.¹⁰⁶

The *layha* from 2009 mandated that shadow governors form education and trade commissions to operate alongside the military commissions, which had previously made all decisions independently. The *layha* from 2010 improved relations with NGOs, and particularly in the fields of education and health, the new strategy moved away from destroying facilities towards seeking co-optation. The Taliban also began developing procedures to handle civilian complaints, such as those regarding civilian casualties and compensation. In 2013, the Taliban established a military commission responsible for investigating the civilian casualties they were accused of causing.¹⁰⁷

Overall, the *layha* shifted from primarily functioning as a code of conduct for fighters to a more comprehensive ideological framework and set of political guidelines with detailed prescriptions for how the Taliban should organise themselves in the areas where they were present.¹⁰⁸

In November 2010, the International Crisis Group (ICG) reported that, despite the surge, the Taliban continued to exercise a form of governance in large rural areas, including appointing governors, collecting taxes, operating courts and mediating in conflicts.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, the Taliban strategically expanded their shadow governments into other parts of the country,¹¹⁰ as they were pressured in their traditional southern and eastern strongholds.¹¹¹ They also gained control over various districts in Ghazni Province between 2008 and 2011, where they established shadow governance structures.¹¹² Even in Kabul, it was estimated that the Taliban already had an active shadow government by June 2011.¹¹³

Despite the significant Taliban losses sustained during the surge, they continued to implement 'several significant, forward-looking structural and policy shifts [that]

would culminate after the drawdown of international forces ended in 2014'.¹¹⁴ A central figure in this transformation was Mullah Akhtar Mansour, who is credited with evolving the movement from an insurgent group with a strong focus on military affairs 'into both a political movement and a government in waiting',¹¹⁵ while also playing a key role in Afghanistan's opium trade and contributing significantly to the development of the Taliban's financing.¹¹⁶

2014–21: The third phase marks the conclusion of the American troop withdrawal, which had already begun in 2012 and resulted in a reduction from approximately 140,000 troops (in 2010) to 9,800 troops by January 2017.¹¹⁷ The number of other international troops also decreased during this period – from around 40,000 (November 2010) to approximately 6,300 (January 2017).¹¹⁸ During this time, the Taliban developed increasingly coherent governance structures and policy programmes. The reduced military pressure allowed them to expand their influence into new areas and to allocate more resources to governance-related activities.¹¹⁹ Another consequence of the withdrawal of international troops was their gradual disappearance from the civilian arena, as the civilian effort relied on the establishment of security.

It has been argued that the reduced presence of international troops led the Taliban to perceive educational institutions differently: Rather than viewing them as expressions of Western indoctrination of young Afghans, they began to see them as places where they could exert influence. This new perception reportedly further contributed to their strategic shift, resulting in fewer attacks on educational institutions and other state entities.¹²⁰ From 2015 onwards, the Taliban leadership introduced a new structure around the military chain of command. Until this point, there had been very little contact between the Taliban's nationwide civilian commissions and representatives of these civilian commissions at the provincial and district levels. The latter often operated separately from their commissions. Moreover, these local civilian representatives were usually acting at the discretion of local military commanders such as the provincial or district shadow governors.

The new structures established from 2015 onwards effectively gave civilian commission representatives real governance responsibilities. This was subsequently reinforced by more specific policies targeting various civilian sectors (e.g. education, health). There was also another significant expansion of Taliban judges during this phase, which involved the deployment of these judges deep into government-controlled and contested areas.¹²¹ These reforms enabled the Taliban to initiate a new campaign not only focused on conquering and holding territory but also on managing areas more effectively. During these years, territorial control typically followed the Taliban's already established influence, which gradually increased alongside their civilian governance capacity.¹²² This growing influence was also manifested through increased regulation and taxation of a rising number of citizens, businesses and state-funded entities, such as schools and hospitals.¹²³ This included the so-called *ushr*, a 10% tax on various services, particularly agriculture, as well as *zakat*, which is a religious tax for the less affluent that the Taliban collected within their areas of influence. It also included the taxation of truck drivers, mobile phone companies and other

businesses. The Taliban primarily used these revenues for their own military agenda rather than for investments in public goods.¹²⁴ More than three years before the 2021 takeover, the Taliban had established shadow governance structures in several provinces. Their influence was described as particularly intrusive in the education sector. For example, the Taliban issued a joint ten-point memorandum with the Helmand Provincial Education Ministry in February 2018, specifying penalties for teachers who failed to attend classes. At this point, the Taliban controlled a range of functions in the education sector in Helmand, such as approving and monitoring teachers, controlling curricula and monitoring student behaviour.¹²⁵

In sum, the extent of the Taliban's shadow governments was already markedly significant more than three years prior to their takeover in 2021. This development corresponded to the degree of their territorial control in early 2018, which was also notable at that time.

Explaining the strength of the Taliban

What are the 'Taliban-specific' explanations for the developments that led to the takeover? Information regarding the Taliban's strength is scattered across quantitative data (as the previous sections have demonstrated), qualitative research literature, official reports such as those accessed from the Danish Defence Intelligence Service (DDIS), reports from NGOs and think tanks, and publicly available media articles. Based on an analysis of these various sources, we summarise three explanations for why the Taliban succeeded in returning to power.

- The Taliban were strategically adaptable and resilient throughout the entire 20-year period. They adjusted their command structures, methods of warfare and their organisation while diversifying their fundraising, refining their tactics and expanding their recruitment base.
- Although the Taliban experienced internal crises, they overcame these divisions. The Taliban's successful integration with the Haqqani network, along with the emergence of ISKP, is part of the explanation for this development.
- The Taliban exploited the weaknesses of the central government, particularly the legitimacy challenges it faced outside Kabul. The disconnection between the central government in Kabul and local authorities at the district and village levels proved advantageous for the Taliban.

The Taliban were strategically adaptable

The development of the Taliban can be understood as a manifestation of their ongoing strategic adaptability. Part of this adaptation in their operational focus, policies and mobilisation has already been described in the preceding sections. Additionally, their establishment of local administrations met local community needs, particularly regarding mediation in local disputes over property rights and family matters.

Taliban expert Antonio Giustozzi is among those who have characterised the Taliban's strategic adaptability as a significant factor influencing the outcome of the war.¹²⁶ His work is partly based on interviews with Taliban members and a review

of the Taliban's strategic documents. Overall, his research indicates that, throughout the 20 years of conflict, insufficient attention was paid to the Taliban's adaptability, organisational structure and their underestimated ability to persist. In his analysis of the Taliban warfare, Giustozzi specifically emphasises the following factors that emerge as explanations for the Taliban's resilience despite high casualties: Firstly, the Taliban continuously adapted their command structures.¹²⁷ Particularly the period from 2005 to 2009 was marked by the Taliban focus on organisational adaptation, with the Quetta Shura in Pakistan (the Taliban's supreme council) establishing commissions and sub-councils to plan and lead the insurgency effectively. The Taliban's organisational adaptation also encompassed intelligence gathering and logistics, and they developed increasingly sophisticated methods for these functions over the course of the 20-year period. Giustozzi further notes how the Taliban's polycentric organisational structure contributed to the group's resilience.

Secondly, the Taliban introduced new tactics to adapt to military challenges. This adaptation notably involved their increasing use of IEDs in response to the expansion of ISAF forces, as well as reducing the size of their tactical units to avoid detection and minimise casualties. This shift towards guerrilla warfare marked a departure from the Taliban's previously more direct methods of combat. Part of this strategy also included the establishment of mobile bases rather than stationary ones, and the Taliban created special forces (Sare Qeta Special Forces), reflecting their transition towards a more professionalised insurgent leadership. Over time, in several instances, the Taliban established elite units that replaced local militias.¹²⁸

Thirdly, the Taliban successfully attracted increased resources and diversified their fundraising by garnering external support from regional actors while also collecting taxes locally.¹²⁹ The diversification of their funding partly resulted from their organisational structure, which was both hierarchical and featured multiple 'centres', meaning several leadership councils. The Taliban received assistance from jihadist groups (e.g. TTP, IMU and al-Qaeda-related movements) as well as from other countries that could reinforce their operations. As regards state-related support, Pakistan played a fundamental role for the Taliban's ability to re-organise, especially following their toppling from power in 2001. As outlined by Farrell and Semple, in 2015, the Taliban leadership was 'acutely aware that its military campaign is dependent upon retaining access to Pakistani territory'.¹³⁰ Reports have indicated that Pakistani security actors periodically provided the Afghan Taliban with weapons and equipment, particularly including small arms, rocket-propelled grenades and light artillery,¹³¹ while they received training in tactics, warfare and explosives manufacturing.¹³² Furthermore, the Taliban's leadership council maintained headquarters in Pakistani cities such as Quetta, Miran Shah and Peshawar.¹³³ This indirect support included allowing the Taliban to have sanctuaries that could be used for infiltration, administration, recruitment and logistics.¹³⁴ Consequently, the Taliban enjoyed relative freedom of movement across the border without being disturbed by Pakistan's military or border security forces.¹³⁵ This was one of the key reasons why the Taliban proved difficult to defeat, despite the presence of a US drone program in Pakistan.¹³⁶

Over time, the Taliban could increasingly also offer financial incentives to attract new recruits. A force largely consisting of volunteers was therefore gradually

replaced by fighters who were paid or offered other incentives. The Taliban's increased access to financial resources stemmed from economic fundraising and was further strengthened by support from regional states. Besides Pakistan, this also included Iran.

In particular, this regards the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) which supported the Taliban. There were also good relations between Iranian security actors and al-Qaeda, whose presumed leadership has been based in Teheran following the death of Osama bin Laden.¹³⁷ In 2007, for instance, local authorities in Herat discovered ten tonnes of weapons that were allegedly produced in China, Russia and Iran.¹³⁸ The United States subsequently complained to China about their arms shipments to Iran that ended up in the hands of the Taliban. Intelligence assessments also suggest that the Taliban acquired some of their equipment through the IRGC.¹³⁹

On the background of their adaptability and networks in neighbouring countries, the Taliban also successfully expanded their recruitment base. Particularly during the period 2005–06, they received support from local religious leaders and community elders who shared the Taliban's opposition against the presence of foreign powers. The Taliban's local support structures that assisted in resource mobilisation were particularly well-developed in Kandahar and Helmand. The ongoing tactical adaptation on the ground and their ability to exploit changes and the challenges faced by their adversaries collectively reflect their increasing professionalisation over the years. This understanding of the Taliban is also reflected in the Danish Security and Intelligence Service threat assessments from the period 2005–21. The assessments consistently highlighted how the Taliban positioned themselves as an alternative to the government in Kabul. In the early years, the Taliban were described in terms of a heterogeneous movement; over time, however, they increasingly collaborated on and executed larger, more coordinated attacks. The opium trade became a growing part of the Taliban's economic foundation.¹⁴⁰

The Taliban and the Haqqani-network aligned

Although the Taliban remained resilient, they underwent numerous internal crises. Their internal divisions have been highlighted as a missed opportunity to pressure them to the negotiating table and secure a more advantageous agreement than the one reached during the final stages of the war between the Taliban and the US (see the next chapter on negotiations).¹⁴¹ Ultimately, the Taliban managed to overcome these divisions and turn them into a strength.

The first internal division resulted from a rivalry between the Taliban and the Haqqani Network.¹⁴² The roots of the Haqqani Network predate the Taliban. Jalaluddin Haqqani (1939–2018), the network's first leader, was among the first mujahideen to call for an uprising against Afghanistan's sitting president, Sardar Mohammed Daud, even before the Soviet invasion in 1979.¹⁴³ Haqqani and many other opponents of the pro-communist regime in Afghanistan were granted asylum in Pakistan but later returned to drive the Russians out of Afghanistan. These mujahideen received financial and logistical support from the United States, Pakistan

and Saudi Arabia in their fight against the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, Haqqani became immensely popular with the American intelligence agency, the CIA, as he adeptly recruited skilled fighters and strategists from the Arab world – including Osama bin Laden – to combat the common communist enemy.¹⁴⁴ The Taliban’s success in rapidly reclaiming Afghanistan during the war’s final phase is often attributed to the Haqqani Network’s military capabilities.¹⁴⁵

The Haqqani–Taliban disagreements began in 2007, when Jalaluddin Haqqani stepped down as leader due to health issues and was succeeded by his son, Sirajuddin Haqqani. Sirajuddin was able to raise significant financial support and began to challenge the authority of the Quetta Shura.¹⁴⁶ The Quetta Shura (also known as the Rahbari or leadership Shura) was established in 2003 in Quetta, the provincial capital of Pakistan’s Balochistan province, to unite the senior Taliban leadership for better coordination and organisation of the insurgency. Following this, competing leadership councils were established in the Pakistani tribal areas (the Miran Shah Shura) and later in the city of Peshawar (the Peshawar Shura). The three leadership councils began operating independently of one another and developed their own taxation systems.¹⁴⁷ However, the establishment of these competing councils also allowed the Taliban to expand their operations into new areas, not least in strategically important regions such as Logar and Wardak. Internally, the councils disagreed on strategic priorities and on defining the most critical areas for territorial control.¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, these disagreements did not hinder their territorial expansion; to the contrary, they became a source of strength as they extended in multiple directions.¹⁴⁹

The Taliban also experienced a significant crisis between 2013 and 2016, characterised by internal rivalry, power struggles and disagreements within the movement. These divisions particularly arose over the question of the group’s leadership following the announcement of Mullah Omar’s death in July 2015 (although he had actually died in 2013) and the subsequent formal appointment of Mullah Mansour as their leader in August 2015. Despite Mullah Mansour’s close association with Mullah Omar, not everyone was satisfied with his appointment.¹⁵⁰ Mansour’s leadership tenure was relatively short-lived, as he was killed shortly thereafter by a US drone strike in May 2016 while travelling from Iran to Pakistan.¹⁵¹ One consequence of this division was the emergence of a rival Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammad Rasool Akhund, who established his own splinter faction of the Taliban, which he named the High Council of Afghanistan Islamic Emirate. During this period, the rival Taliban factions engaged in hostilities against one another (see Table 2.2 for targets of attacks).

Table 2.2 Total number of deaths caused by the Taliban 2001–2021

<i>Targets</i>	<i>2001–04</i>	<i>2005–09</i>	<i>2010–13</i>	<i>2014–17</i>	<i>2018–21</i>
NATO and ANDSF	461	4,741	6,384	12,739	17,595
Islamic State	0	0	0	266	98
Rival Taliban factions	0	0	0	97	48
Civilians	53	670	356	571	604

Source: The authors’ own calculations based on the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global version 24.1

The Taliban were also divided over the issue of peace negotiations with the Kabul government and the United States, and they lost some of their supporters to another rising rival, the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP), particularly in response to their dialogue with the US. ISKP began recruiting in Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2015.¹⁵² Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada – the third Taliban leader – now faced the challenge of unifying the Taliban. He sought to draw both the Haqqani Network and Mullah Omar's son closer to him, focusing on internal reconciliation. Under his leadership, stronger bonds developed between the Taliban and the Haqqani Network, which had now more or less united under the Taliban banner.

The official announcement of ISKP as an IS affiliate by the IS spokesman in Syria, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, thus fell within a timeframe shaped by internal divisions within the Taliban.¹⁵³ It was also during this period that ISAF transitioned to Resolute Support Mission (RSM), following a massive decrease in the number of international troops. ISKP's strongholds in Afghanistan were primarily located in the northeastern Kunar Province and the adjacent Nangarhar Province (particularly in Achin District). Both areas border the tribally dominated areas in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, which allowed ISKP to draw support from both sides of the border. The ISKP fighters comprised not only Afghans and Pakistanis but also a wide range of foreign fighters, primarily of Central Asian origin, including Tajiks and Uzbeks from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and militant Uyghurs from China.¹⁵⁴ The Taliban and ISKP were fighting each other, which led to the US and Taliban sharing an interest in minimising ISKP influence (which, in February 2016, comprised between 1,000 and 3,000 fighters), as they both wanted to avoid a repeat of the catastrophe experienced in Syria/Iraq, where IS had gained massive territorial control in 2014.¹⁵⁵

The globally oriented ISKP posed a greater threat to US interests than the nationalist Taliban. Consequently, the Taliban's moments of weakness – marked by internal rivalries – were not exploited, as the US focus shifted. We elaborate on this point in the next two chapters.¹⁵⁶

The Taliban exploited the central government's legitimacy issues

In Afghanistan, informal power structures and local governance have historically played a crucial role. As noted in the academic literature, identification with a centralised state has never been particularly strong in the country.¹⁵⁷ Ethnic divisions – whether one identifies as Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek or Pashtun – define the organisation of informal hierarchies, and societal tensions have often been shaped by these differences. Warlords from the Cold War and the subsequent civil war, as well as local tribal leaders, have significantly influenced both local and national political dynamics. Moreover, there have been overlaps and connections between the economically privileged segments of society and those holding political authority. Afghanistan's socioeconomic conditions have resulted in a society characterised by the population's deep reliance on the privileged, contributing to the abuse of power and nepotism. Approximately half of the Afghan population lived in poverty during the war, which reinforced what the academic literature describes as patronage

politics¹⁵⁸ – politics marked by clientelism, preferential treatment of one's own tribe, village or clan, and a profound dependence on the elite.¹⁵⁹ Additionally, the alliances behind the nomination of presidential candidates were often so fragmented and politically discordant that they paralysed the central government. Formulating political programmes based on a mandate driven by individual agendas rather than political visions proved challenging.¹⁶⁰

One of the significant legitimacy challenges that benefited the Taliban was the rehabilitation of former Afghan warlords as statesmen, which was a strategy pursued by the US and its allies in the post-2001 period. The US supported the Northern Alliance warlords during the Bonn negotiations in late 2001, owing to their historical enmity towards the Taliban and the role they were to play in combating the Taliban and al-Qaeda (see the chapter on the American war in Afghanistan). This support became evident in the allocation of key political positions within the Afghan government. Moreover, the Americans provided local commanders and warlords with financial and military resources to fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Paradoxically, this support weakened the central government's authority, as the local warlords were often at odds with the law and, in many cases, notorious for their brutal behaviour and human rights violations. Despite the 2004 constitution defining Afghanistan as a centralised presidential system, a form of power-sharing continued between the warlords and Afghan President Hamid Karzai following the first democratic presidential election in 2004. The combination of access to American resources and positions within the Afghan government allowed these warlords to increase their influence. Consequently, several obscure local authorities were elevated to prominent political figures, which undermined the stability of the central government.

The complexity of the Afghan social structure is largely grounded in tribal affiliations and marked distinctions between rural and urban settings. Within each Provincial Council, there were districts and villages with informal representatives, including tribal leaders, warlords and religious figures.¹⁶¹ Additionally, parallel legal systems were part of the informal governance, with Taliban supporters already integrated into these structures before 2001, when they held power in Afghanistan – both in *jirgas* (tribal councils) and *shuras* (religious councils). Historically, *jirgas* are rooted in the Pashtun tribal system and serve as gatherings to reach consensus on significant disputes. Local communities may prefer such informal councils over the state legal system due to their expedience, avoiding what could be perceived as humiliations associated with publicly bringing disputes to state courts. Informal local councils have historically been utilised to resolve community conflicts, such as property and family issues, and their use particularly reflects concerns regarding corruption within public institutions.

In several instances, the support for dubious figures, whose track records were well-known to segments of the local population, proved counterproductive in the struggle against the Taliban. A Danish documentary from 2023, *Bedraget i Helmand* [The Deception in Helmand], highlights reports of abused children, together with drug trafficking, murder and rape, to which local police forces subjected the civilian population of Helmand Province.¹⁶² Journalists have reported numerous examples, and the academic literature has uncovered a negative impact of 'instrumental'

local power brokers (backed by the US and NATO) on the legitimacy of the central government, which the Taliban could exploit. Some of these examples have been elaborately detailed by Afghan researcher Haqmal Daudzai to illustrate the significant legitimacy challenges in what was described in political terms as a process of democratisation.¹⁶³

- In Balkh Province in northern Afghanistan, NATO and the US supported Atta Mohammad Noor, who was notorious both for his corruption and for committing numerous human rights violations. Human Rights Watch attributed a range of abuses to Noor, particularly against the Pashtun minority in the region. At the same time, he was in opposition to both Presidents Karzai and Ghani until he resigned as governor in 2018. The discrimination perpetrated by the actors supported by the US and NATO in Balkh enabled the Taliban to gain support among Pashtuns, who are a minority in the province.
- In Herat Province, which borders Iran and Turkmenistan, President Karzai faced difficulties with a local warlord, Ismail Khan, who withheld millions in customs revenues following the fall of the Taliban regime until Karzai offered him a ministerial position in Kabul. Khan was a controversial figure, partly due to his status as a former Soviet-era mujahid, and he was either well-liked or despised among the local populace. At the same time, Herat was home to one of the many drug mafias that influenced electoral outcomes by providing financial support to political candidates in exchange for being allowed to operate freely. Additionally, Kamran Alizada, the head of the provincial council, was known for his drug trafficking involvement and for managing a drug route.
- Nangarhar, a Pashtun-dominated province in eastern Afghanistan, exemplified how the same families effectively inherited power and how the central government had limited authority over local factions. Abdul Qadeer, Haji Zaman and Hazrat Ali, three warlords from the region, received CIA support to target al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Tora Bora. Following Qadeer's death, his brother became governor, while his son, Zahir Qadeer, subsequently consolidated power through drug trafficking, CIA funding and his militias. He eventually secured a seat in parliament. Zahir Qadeer was also accused of human rights abuses, similar to Hazrat Ali. Successive governors appointed by President Ghani's administration struggled to implement reforms due to the significant influence that these two figures continued to exert in the area.
- Kandahar served as an example of the power struggle among prominent Pashtun tribal leaders: Gul Agha Sherzai from the Barakzai tribe, Ahmad Wali Karzai from the Popalzai tribe and Abdul Raziq from the Achakzai tribe. Sherzai, who was supported by the CIA, had considerable control over financial assets and trade routes but was appointed to the national cabinet due to his disputes with Wali Karzai. Subsequently, Wali Karzai dominated Kandahar, manipulating the political landscape and engaging in drug trafficking until he was murdered on 12 July 2011. He also owned security firms that serviced the US military. Abdul Raziq, known for his anti-Taliban views and brutal behaviour, filled the power vacuum following the murder.

The Taliban readily exploited such scandals, brutality and violations to their advantage. They could identify the local criminals supported by the American-led coalition. At the same time, they were already integrated into the informal structures present in various parts of Afghanistan.

The DDIS threat assessments (from 2005 to 2021) further illustrate how the Afghan central government was consistently characterised by political division, corruption and nepotism throughout this period. For instance, Hamid Karzai, who served as president for more than half of the 20-year period (2004–14), appointed family members to political positions despite their involvement in economic scandals.¹⁶⁴ His political network and support were found among what some have described as the economic mafia; strong business connections, including familial ties, profiting from extortion and illegal trade.¹⁶⁵ Even during his first term, Karzai was portrayed as someone who attained power by leveraging his business networks, which were notorious for mafia-like methods.¹⁶⁶

Ashraf Ghani, who led the subsequent governments, was not renowned for his enthusiasm for democracy and pluralism (he is sometimes characterised more as a technocratic autocrat than a democrat),¹⁶⁷ and non-Pashtuns in particular viewed him as an ethnocentric figure. He ascended to the presidency on a slender mandate (with low voter turnout) and amid allegations of electoral fraud. His support base comprised a series of highly fragmented factions, including notorious warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, who had played a role in his nomination. Leading up to the 2014 election, Ghani's mandate thus consisted of various incompatible actors, including Dostum, the northern strongman, Anwar ul-Haq, a Pashtun leader of the Afghan Social Democratic Party (Afghan Mellat), Musa Khan Hotak, a former Taliban official, and the formerly mentioned Zahir Qadeer, accused of trafficking and tax evasion.¹⁶⁸ This situation epitomised the state of his administrations, which were further fragmented by a power-sharing agreement with his main political rival, Abdullah Abdullah, in 2020.

The DDIS threat assessments also indicated that the government's legitimacy among the population was low throughout this period, and that unemployment remained high, contributing to the government's unpopularity and the Taliban's increasingly successful recruitment efforts. The assessments also noted ongoing public demonstrations driven by frustrations over the country's dire economic and security situation. Throughout this time, the DDIS advised the international coalition not to intervene in disputes surrounding opium production and distribution, as such actions were seen as an infringement on local power structures and could exacerbate the overall threat landscape.¹⁶⁹

In 2014, the DDIS assessed the unity government formed in September 2014 between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah as fragile. Allegations of electoral fraud and the concentration of power in the hands of the incumbent president and powerful regional leaders had prolonged the final resolution of the disagreements between the two presidential candidates and undermined the democratic legitimacy of the election. The result of the September 2019 presidential election was also contested, and political institutions remained weak and dysfunctional. The DDIS described the government as a group of actors that

was unable to convert their shared resistance against the Taliban into effective political cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic further undermined the government's position, as Afghanistan suddenly faced a severe economic crisis marked by rising food prices and increasing unemployment.¹⁷⁰ The challenges faced by the central government provided ample material for the Taliban to mobilise against.¹⁷¹ The legitimacy challenges facing the Afghan government were only one side of the issue. The legitimacy challenges related to the American war and NATO's capacity-building efforts (described in [Chapters 4–6](#)) constituted the other side, which further contributed to the Taliban's capacity for mobilisation and resilience.

Conclusion

The examination of the Taliban's development demonstrates that the group did not regain power overnight during the final phase of the war. Rather, the takeover was the result of a gradual process, marked by consistent advances when assessed against three indicators of the Taliban's strength: Their combat capability, territorial control and shadow governance. Following a couple of years of organisational weakness after the US-led intervention that ousted them from power, the Taliban re-established themselves and commenced their insurgency.

In the first years following 2001, the Taliban were severely weakened, bearing the brunt of a significant military defeat and the loss of a substantial number of fighters. The leadership quickly focused on how to rebuild a cohesive organisation. The situation began to shift around 2005, as the Taliban expanded their territorial presence, and their armed assaults grew more sophisticated. By 2009, the Taliban's influence was measurable in nearly all Afghan provinces. This expanded territorial presence was accompanied by notable advances in the Taliban's governance, particularly with significant increases in the number of Taliban-affiliated judges in the local judicial systems.

The period between 2010 and 2013 was shaped by the US-led troop surge, which temporarily weakened the Taliban. However, their overall level of armed activity remained relatively stable. The surge also impacted the Taliban's territorial control; by 2012, the Afghan central government had regained control over seven provincial capitals that the Taliban had previously contested. The high casualty rates experienced by the Taliban, including the loss of senior commanders, also affected their civilian presence. The Taliban countered by expanding their shadow governance activities into areas where they faced less military pressure.

Following significantly reduced numbers of international troops from December 2009 onwards and the transfer of formal security responsibilities from ISAF (NATO) to the ANDSF (the Afghan forces) in 2014, the Taliban proved once again able to recruit larger numbers of new fighters and conducted more frequent and increasingly sophisticated attacks. This growing combat capability also contributed to an increase in their territorial presence and control, particularly between 2015 and 2017. The reduced numbers of international troops, many of whom had been engaged in civilian roles, left a substantial gap that the Taliban exploited by

expanding the scope of their shadow governance structures. Already in 2018, three years prior to the Taliban takeover, the extent of their shadow governance in several provinces was extensive.

The Taliban's momentum continued through to 2021. There were temporary interruptions in the advancing developments, attributed in part to a ceasefire in June 2018, which lasted only three days, and increased American airstrikes (2017–18). The Taliban quickly regained their strength thereafter, however, with the number of districts under their control doubling between 2018 and 2020. From early 2021 until the final takeover in August 2021, an even greater increase in Taliban control over new areas was registered.

In sum, this chapter has identified three 'Taliban-specific' explanations for the ability of the group to return to power in 2021, based on the existing research literature. The first lies in the group's strategic adaptability. Despite facing military pressure for short periods, the Taliban demonstrated resilience throughout. They adapted their command structures, combat strategies and organisational frameworks while diversifying their fundraising efforts, refining their tactics and expanding their recruitment base. They received both direct and indirect support from regional neighbours, especially Pakistan, in the form of financial and military support as well as in the opportunity to access operational safe havens that proved crucial for reorganising during phases of high military pressure. The second explanation relates to the Taliban decision to put past disagreements behind them and to ally with the Haqqani network. Although the Taliban endured numerous internal crises over the 20-year period, they managed to overcome these divisions. The emergence of ISKP provides part of the explanation for why the Taliban's weaknesses were not exploited to negotiate a better agreement than the one that ultimately culminated in the Doha Agreement (see the next chapter on negotiations with the Taliban). Lastly, the third explanation for the Taliban's development relates to their ability to exploit the weaknesses of the central government, particularly the legitimacy challenges it faced outside of Kabul. The disconnect between the central government in Kabul and local authorities at the district and village levels, alongside a series of scandals involving brutality, human rights violations, corruption and nepotism, worked to the advantage of the Taliban's mobilisation efforts.

Notes

- 1 According to our own estimations based on data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the Taliban lost more than 160,000 fighters over the 20-year period (2001–21), nearly four times as many as the combined total losses of the Afghan National Army and its international partners. For more information about the underlying dataset, see Ralph Sundberg and Erik Melander (2013), 'Introducing the UCDP georeferenced events dataset', *Journal of Peace Research* 50(4), 523–32.
- 2 The Taliban have never been a completely homogeneous unitary actor; rather, especially in the early stages of the war, it was a fragmented organisation with multiple internal power centres. See Antonio Giustozzi (2022), *The Taliban at War: 2001–2021*, Hurst.
- 3 *Mujahideen*, the plural of *mujahid*, means 'holy warriors' in Arabic.

- 4 Ahmed Rashid (2000), *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, Yale University Press, pp. 13–18.
- 5 This is elaborated upon by Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, p. 21 as well as by M. Hasan Kakar (1995), *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979–1982* (in the section ‘Epilogue, 1982–1994’).
- 6 Previous assessments of Afghanistan’s ethnic composition estimate that Pashtuns make up approximately 42% of the total population, followed by Tajiks (27%), Hazaras (9%), Uzbeks (9%) and Turkmen (3%). See Minority Rights Group, *Afghanistan* (n.d.); Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, p. 21.
- 7 Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, p. 21.
- 8 Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, p. 22.
- 9 Mona Sheikh (2016), *Guardians of God: Inside the Religious Mind of the Pakistani Taliban*, Oxford University Press, p. 40.
- 10 Although early Deobandism was a forward-looking reform movement that valued education and sought to align sharia-based legal interpretations with contemporary politics, it was exclusionary towards women and Shia Muslims, and it rejected tribal and clan-based power structures.
- 11 Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, p. 87.
- 12 Antonio Giustozzi (2019), *The Taliban at War: 2001–2018*, Hurst, p. 5.
- 13 Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, pp. 88–92.
- 14 Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, pp. 27–29.
- 15 Kristian B. Harpviken (2012), ‘The transnationalization of the Taliban’, *International Area Studies Review* 15(3), 203–229, p. 209.
- 16 Moreover, Mullah Omar also declared jihad against his rival Rabbani, thereby rejecting any attempts at negotiations that had been suggested by some within the country. Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, pp. 41–42.
- 17 Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam*, p. 50.
- 18 *The Irish Times*, ‘Ex president hanged by Taliban after fall of Kabul’, 28 September 1996.
- 19 Farkhondeh Akbari, *The Risks Facing Hazaras in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan*, Program on Extremism at George Washington University, 7 March 2022.
- 20 The Northern Alliance formally represented Afghanistan despite the Taliban maintaining an office at the UN until June 2001, when they were expelled due to their destruction of the Buddha statues in Bamiyan earlier that year. While the UN attempted to maintain diplomatic contacts with the Taliban until June 2001, all UN offices in Afghanistan, except for the one in Northern Alliance territory, were closed by the Taliban in response to their denial of representation in the UN system in New York. Loyn (2022), ‘Francesc Vendrell in Afghanistan 2000–2008: talking to the Taliban, the Bonn Accords, and USA–Iran Talks’; Francesc Vendrell and Thomas Ruttig (2018), *AAN’s Francesc Vendrell and Thomas Ruttig on reaching out to Taliban in 2000 – June 2018. Episode: 1*. Regarding the Northern Alliance, see also Romain Malejacq (2019), *Warlord Survival: The Delusion of State Building in Afghanistan*, Cornell University Press.
- 21 Tricia Bacon and Daniel Byman (2021), ‘De-Talibanization and the onset of insurgency in Afghanistan’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46(10), 1–25, p. 5. A significant issue during the first Taliban regime was the lack of technocratic capacity and knowledge, both because the Taliban themselves lacked expertise and because they actively marginalised educated Afghans, whom they regarded as corrupted by Western or Soviet education. Furthermore, the Taliban invested the majority of their economic resources in strengthening their military capacity rather than in civilian governance.
- 22 The Clinton administration had a brief engagement with the Taliban regarding the establishment of an oil pipeline from Central Asia through Afghanistan to India and Pakistan. This project was promoted and supported by President Clinton and involved negotiations with the Taliban. However, political relations were abandoned in 1998 when it

- became evident that al-Qaeda, based in Afghanistan, was responsible for the terrorist attacks on the embassies in East Africa. See [National Commission on Terrorist Attacks \(2004\)](#), *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*, chapter 4.
- 23 Jean-Charles Brisard and Guillaume Dasquié (2002), *Forbidden Truth: U.S.–Taliban Secret Oil Diplomacy and the Failed Hunt for bin Laden*, Thunder's Mouth Press, p. 45.
 - 24 The sequence of events is detailed in Robert L. [Grenier \(2015\)](#), *88 Days to Kandahar: A CIA Diary*, Simon & Schuster, chapter 5.
 - 25 These were the resolutions UNSCR 1267 and UNSCR 1333; see Resolution, UN Security Council, 'Resolution 1267', 15 October 1999 and Resolution, UN Security Council, 'Resolution 1333', 19 December 2000.
 - 26 A collection of translated texts by bin Laden illustrates how he was preoccupied throughout the 1990s with the expansion of American bases in the Middle East. See Bruce [Lawrence \(2005\)](#), *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, Verso Books.
 - 27 Fawas [Gerges \(2011\)](#), *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*, Oxford University Press, pp. 84–90.
 - 28 *The Guardian*, 'Taliban defy Bush ultimatum', 21 September 2001.
 - 29 Council on Foreign Relations (2021), *Timeline: The U.S. War in Afghanistan*.
 - 30 Our phases follow the periodisation identified by researchers Ashley Jackson and Rahmatullah Amiri (2019), 'Insurgent bureaucracy: how the Taliban makes policy', *Peaceworks*, 19 November, pp. 6–7.
 - 31 Sundberg and Melander, 'UCDP georeferenced event dataset'; Shawn Davies, Therése Pettersson, and Magnus Öberg (2023), 'Organized violence 1989–2022, and the return of conflict between states', *Journal of Peace Research* 60(4), 691–708.
 - 32 Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2018*, p. 33.
 - 33 Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2018*, p. 18.
 - 34 The southern provinces were Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan and Zabul. Even at this early stage, however, a few focal points could be identified, particularly the district of Spin Boldak near the Pakistani border and close to Quetta, where the Taliban leadership was based.
 - 35 ICG, 'Afghanistan: from presidential to parliamentary elections', *Asia Report*, 23 November 2004, p. 26.
 - 36 Samina Ahmed, 'Warlords, drugs, democracy', *International Crisis Group*, 1 May 2004.
 - 37 While the UN statistics recorded 17 suicide attacks throughout 2005, there were 106 suicide bombings alone between January and October 2006; ICG, 'Countering Afghanistan's insurgency: no quick fixes', *Asia Report*, 2 November 2006, p. 6.
 - 38 Scott [Smith \(2020\)](#), 'Service delivery in Taliban-influenced areas of Afghanistan', USIP Special Report, 30 April 2020, p. 6.
 - 39 ICG, 'Countering Afghanistan's insurgency', p. 15.
 - 40 Joanna Nathan, 'Fears for security weigh on election hopes', *International Crisis Group*, 20 July 2005. In a leaked 2009 cable, the US ambassador to Afghanistan wrote that 'Pakistan will remain the single greatest source of Afghan instability so long as the border sanctuaries remain': The National Security Archive, 'Subject: COIN Strategy: Civilian Concerns,' 6 November 2009, p. 4.
 - 41 While large parts of the central, northern and northeastern provinces remained relatively calm, Herat and Farah in the west, as well as Kunduz and Baghlan in the northeast, experienced significant increases in the number of attacks.
 - 42 Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2018*, pp. 48–49.
 - 43 UCDP recorded a total of five attacks resulting in at least 25 fatalities during this period.
 - 44 ICG, 'Afghanistan: exit vs engagement', *Asia Report*, 28 November 2010, p. 1.
 - 45 The increase amounted to 82% in the first half of 2010 compared to the previous year: ICG, 'exit vs engagement', p. 2.
 - 46 This assessment has been criticised by independent analysts who noted that the Taliban appeared to have adjusted their tactics and were now focusing more on attacking

- ANDSF and civilian targets; Kate Clark, 'Counting victories and losses: the war of stats', Afghanistan Analysts Network, 22 October 2011.
- 47 ICG, 'The insurgency in Afghanistan's heartland', *Asia Report*, 27 June 2011, p. i.
- 48 ICG, 'Afghanistan: the long, hard road to the 2014 transition', *Asia Report*, 8 October 2012.
- 49 Thomas Ruttig, 'Leaving Afghanistan: where's the progress?', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 24 June 2011.
- 50 Thomas Ruttig, 'After the "operational pause": how big is the insurgents' 2013 spring offensive?', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 2 June 2013.
- 51 The provinces were Kapisa, Laghman, Logar, Parwan and Wardak. This development is also discussed by Candace Rondeaux in an interview with the International Crisis Group: Candace Rondeaux, 'Afghanistan: the spreading insurgency (interview)', *International Crisis Group*, 27 June 2011.
- 52 ICG, 'Afghanistan's heartland', pp. 1–2.
- 53 Antonio Giustozzi and Christoph Reuter, 'The insurgents of the Afghan north', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 5 May 2011.
- 54 Mona Sheikh (2017), 'Islamic State enters al-Qaeda's old hotbed: Afghanistan and Pakistan', *The Quarterly Journal* 16(1), 37–49.
- 55 Daniel L. Davis (2018), 'Trump's instincts on Afghanistan are right, so what happened?', *War on the Rocks*, 10 May 2018.
- 56 Statement, President Barack Obama, The White House, 'Statement by the President on the end of the combat mission in Afghanistan', 28 December 2014.
- 57 Ashley Jackson, 'Life under the Taliban shadow government', ODI, 20 June 2018, p. 9.
- 58 ICG, 'Afghanistan's insurgency after the transition', *Asia Report*, 12 May 2014.
- 59 Ruttig, 'operational pause'. Despite the overall increase in Taliban attacks, there were a few notable exceptions. In Kandahar province, for instance, UCDP data indicates a significant drop in the number of Taliban-related fatalities compared to the previous time period. One possible explanation for this decline could lie in the anti-Taliban operations of powerful army general Abdul Razziq, although these operations were also accompanied by allegations of serious human rights violations and therefore cannot be unequivocally described as 'successful'. For more on this particular aspect, see: *The New York Times*, 'Powerful Afghan police chief puts fear in Taliban and their enemies', 9 November 2014. While Taliban attacks dramatically decreased in the vicinity of Kandahar City, their attacks actually increased in several of Kandahar's more remote districts, from which international troops had withdrawn: Graeme Smith, 'Grabbing the wolf's tail: keep foreign troops in Afghanistan', *International Crisis Group*, 16 January 2014. Other observers assessed that the Taliban deliberately attempted to maintain a lower profile in the province in order to use it as a safe haven for future operations; Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2018*, p. 222.
- 60 In the north (Jowzjan), west (Farah), east (Nangarhar, Nurestan) and south (Uruzgan, Zabul).
- 61 Matthew DuPée (2018), 'Red on Red: analyzing Afghanistan's intra-insurgency violence', *CTC Sentinel* 11(1), 26–32, p. 29.
- 62 David Kilcullen (2016), *Blood Year: Islamic State and the Failures of the War on Terror*, Hurst, p. 177.
- 63 Borhan Osman, 'As new U.S. envoy appointed, turbulent Afghanistan's hopes of peace persist', *International Crisis Group*, 5 September 2018; Jackson and Amiri, 'Insurgent bureaucracy', p. 10.
- 64 Report, UN Security Council (28 January 2022), 'The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security'; as regards the deteriorating trends during 2017, see also Thomas Ruttig, 'More violent, more widespread: trends in Afghan security in 2017', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 29 January 2018.
- 65 Particularly in northern and northeastern Afghanistan (Badghis, Takhar, Baghlan, Jowzjan, Balkh and Kunduz), as well as in the western provinces of Herat and Ghor and the central province of Wardak.

- 66 Borhan Osman, 'The cost of escalating violence in Afghanistan', 7 February 2018.
- 67 Osman, 'new U.S. envoy'.
- 68 Osman, 'escalating violence'; Borhan Osman, 'Intensifying violence dulls Afghans' hopes for peace', *International Crisis Group*, 5 July 2019.
- 69 *The New York Times*, 'Taliban ramp up attacks on Afghans after Trump says "no violence"', 4 March 2020.
- 70 Kate Clark, 'Behind the statistics: drop in civilian casualties masks increased Taleban violence', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 27 October 2020.
- 71 Anthony H. Cordesman, 'Afghanistan: a war in crisis!', CSIS, 4 September 2019, p. 122.
- 72 At this time, when the Taliban had yet to consolidate their insurgency, most of their activities took place in Kandahar province, particularly in the Shah Wali Kot district. LWJ has assessed that the Taliban also had a moderate influence in the southern provinces of Helmand, Uruzgan and Zabul, as well as in Ghazni in the southeast and Nurestan and Kunar in the east. See also Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2018*, pp. 20–21.
- 73 Ahmed, 'Warlords, drugs, democracy'.
- 74 This was also stated by Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah in an interview in July 2005; see ICG, 'Countering Afghanistan's insurgency', p. 7.
- 75 ICG, 'Countering Afghanistan's insurgency', p. 7.
- 76 Especially in the south and east, including the border area adjacent to Pakistan; ICG, 'Countering Afghanistan's insurgency', pp. 1, 5.
- 77 In 2009, the Taliban were able to challenge the government control over the provincial capitals in Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan and Zabul in the south, as well as Ghazni in the southeast, Kunar in the east and Takhar in the northeast.
- 78 Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2018*, pp. 20; 59–60.
- 79 Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2018*, p. 66.
- 80 Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2018*, p. 109.
- 81 Thomas Ruttig, 'An offensive foretold', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 13 February 2010.
- 82 Borhan Osman, 'Can the Taleban outwrestle the government? An assessment of the insurgency's military capability', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 25 March 2014; Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2018*, p. 224.
- 83 ICG, 'Pushing for a U-turn in Afghanistan', *International Crisis Group*, 17 September 2015. They captured larger cities such as Kunduz just months after it became widely known that Mullah Omar had died; Borhan Osman, 'The fall of Kunduz: What does it tell us about the strength of the post-Omar Taleban?', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 30 September 2015. According to LWJ, the proportion of Taliban-controlled districts increased from 9% to 14% between 2015 and 2017, while the proportion of contested districts rose from 9% to 19% during the same period.
- 84 These figures are based on various updates published on the LWJ website between 2015 and 2017. See Bill Roggio, 'Taliban flaunts apparent control in Kandahar district', *FDD's Long War Journal*, 28 February 2018. In accordance with LWJ, RSM data shows how the government lost territorial control over large parts of the country between 2015 and 2018. During this period, the number of government-controlled districts and districts under government influence fell by 18 percentage points according to RS (from 72% in November 2015 to 56% in October 2017). The development appears less dramatic in the RSM reporting than in LWJ. The latter recorded a fall in government-controlled territory alone between October 2017 and July 2018 of no less than 30 percentage points (from 68% down to 38%). Similarly, while RS reports an increase in contested districts of 13 percentage points (from 21% in November 2015 to 34% in October 2018), the increase reported by LWJ is significantly higher (from 9% contested districts in October 2015 to 49% contested districts in July 2018). This can be partly explained by RS categorising districts as 'Taliban-influenced' – a category that LWJ does not include. However, RS does not provide any precise definition of what influence means or how it is measured, leaving room for interpretation.

- 85 Amu TV, 'Pompeo spills the beans on Taliban talks and dislike for Ghani', 25 January 2023.
- 86 Especially in the west (Herat, Badghis), in the north (Jowzjan, Balkh), in the northeast (Kunduz, Baghlan, Takhar, Badakhshan), in the east (Kunar, Nurestan, Laghman, Nangarhar) and in parts of the central and southeastern provinces (Daikondi, Wardak, and Ghazni).
- 87 Ibrahim Bahiss et al., 'Rethinking armed group control: towards a new conceptual framework', *Overseas Development Institute* April 2022.
- 88 Jackson, 'Taliban shadow government', p. 5.
- 89 Jackson, 'Taliban shadow government', p. 11.
- 90 Jackson, 'Taliban shadow government', p. 11.
- 91 Jackson, 'Taliban shadow government', p. 7.
- 92 Jackson and Amiri, 'Insurgent bureaucracy', p. 7.
- 93 Smith, 'Service Delivery', p. 5.
- 94 ICG, 'Countering Afghanistan's insurgency', p. 6.
- 95 The phases are taken from a report on Taliban governance published by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP); Jackson and Amiri, 'Insurgent bureaucracy'.
- 96 Jackson and Amiri, 'Insurgent bureaucracy', p. 7.
- 97 Kate Clark, 'The Layha: calling the Taleban to account', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 4 July 2011, p. 5; Smith, 'Service delivery', p. 6.
- 98 ICG, 'Countering Afghanistan's insurgency', p. 8.
- 99 It is estimated that there were approximately 500 Taliban judges in various parts of Afghanistan in 2010; see Antonio Giustozzi, Claudio Franco and Adam Baczko, 'Shadow justice: how the Taliban run their judiciary', *Integrity Watch Afghanistan*, 2013.
- 100 Jackson, 'Taliban shadow government', p. 19.
- 101 Smith, 'Service delivery', p. 8.
- 102 Smith, 'Service delivery', pp. 5–6.
- 103 This was endorsed by a letter issued by Mullah Omar; Jackson, 'Taliban shadow government', p. 8.
- 104 Smith, 'Service delivery', pp. 12–13.
- 105 Jackson and Amiri, 'Insurgent bureaucracy', p. 7.
- 106 Jackson and Amiri, 'Insurgent bureaucracy', p. 7.
- 107 Smith, 'Service delivery', p. 6.
- 108 Jackson and Amiri, 'Insurgent bureaucracy', pp. 7, 33.
- 109 ICG, 'exit vs engagement', p. 5.
- 110 Particularly in the north and northeast in the central and eastern provinces bordering Kabul.
- 111 Giustozzi and Reuter, 'Afghan north', pp. 4–8.
- 112 ICG, 'Afghanistan's heartland', pp. 17–18.
- 113 ICG, 'Afghanistan's heartland', p. 15.
- 114 Jackson and Amiri, 'Insurgent bureaucracy', p. 8.
- 115 Jackson, 'Taliban shadow government', p. 8.
- 116 *The New York Times*, 'Penetrating every stage of Afghan opium chain, Taliban become a cartel', 16 February 2016.
- 117 Davis, 'Trump's instincts'.
- 118 NATO, *NATO and Afghanistan: RS placemats archive*.
- 119 Jackson, 'Taliban shadow government', pp. 8–9.
- 120 Jackson, 'Taliban shadow government', p. 16.
- 121 Jackson and Amiri, 'Insurgent bureaucracy', pp. 8–10.
- 122 Jackson and Amiri, 'Insurgent bureaucracy', p. 10.
- 123 Jackson and Amiri, 'Insurgent bureaucracy', p. 10.
- 124 Smith, 'Service delivery', p. 18.
- 125 In a report from 2018, not a single district was recorded with 'significant Taliban influence or control' where primary schools for girls from seventh grade onwards were open. Jackson, 'Taliban shadow government', p. 14.

- 126 Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2021*, see the introduction.
- 127 Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2021*, chapter 1.
- 128 Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2021*, chapter 5.
- 129 Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2021*, chapter 2.
- 130 Theo Farrell and Michael Semple (2015), 'Making peace with the Taliban', *Survival* 57(6), 79–110, p. 92.
- 131 Human Rights Watch, *Crisis of Impunity: Pakistan's Support of the Taliban*, 1 July 2021.
- 132 Danish Defence Intelligence Service (2020), *Efterretningsmæssig Risikovurdering 2020: Afghanistan*, pp. 72–74.
- 133 European Asylum Support Office (EASO), *Country of Origin Information Report: Afghanistan Security Situation*, January 2016, p. 20.
- 134 Danish Defence Intelligence Service (2011), *Efterretningsmæssig Risikovurdering 2011: Afghanistan and Pakistan*, pp. 19–22.
- 135 EASO, *Country of Origin*, p. 69.
- 136 Bruce Riedel, 'Drone strikes and the U.S.–Pakistan relationship', 5 November 2013; Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University (2023), *Pakistani Civilians*.
- 137 Alireza Nader and Joya Laha, *Iran's balancing act in Afghanistan: report prepared for the Marine Corps intelligence activity*, RAND Report, 31 May 2011, p. 10; Asfandiyar Mir and Colin P. Clarke, 'Making sense of Iran and al-Qaeda's relationship', *The Lawfare Institute*, 21 March 2021.
- 138 *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 'Afghanistan: worried Iran sending Chinese weapons to Taliban', 14 September 2007.
- 139 Danish Defence Intelligence Service (2020), *Efterretningsmæssig Risikovurdering 2020: En aktuel vurdering af forhold i udlandet af betydning for Danmarks sikkerhed*.
- 140 This is derived from our analysis of 20 separate *Situations- og trusselsvurderinger for Afghanistan*, published by DDIS in the years 2005 to 2021.
- 141 Steve Brooking, 'Why was a negotiated peace always out of reach in Afghanistan: opportunities and obstacles, 2001–21', *Peaceworks*, 30 August 2022.
- 142 Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2021*, chapter 3.
- 143 Haqqani joined the movement Hizb-e-Islami, which was one of the first to declare jihad against President Daud due to his communist loyalties towards the Soviet Union.
- 144 Mona Sheikh, 'Haqqani-netværket: Fra ven til fjende', *Ræson*, 13 November 2011.
- 145 The Haqqani network was responsible for some of the deadliest attacks in Afghanistan. See [Office of the Director of National Intelligence \(2024\)](#), *Haqqani network*.
- 146 Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2021*, chapter 4.
- 147 Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2021*, chapter 3. The two new leadership councils sought a more decentralised system, whereas the Quetta Shura represented the desire to maintain the vertical command structure.
- 148 Despite the rivalry with the Quetta Shura, both the Haqqani network and the Peshawar Shura were involved in the decision-making regarding the Taliban's negotiations. They collaborated in some areas while competing in others. The Haqqani network was most active in eastern and southeastern Afghanistan. Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War: 2001–2021*, chapter 3.
- 149 The DDIS reports that the Taliban lost several prominent leaders in 2008 and 2009, but that this had only a limited impact on the morale of the Taliban. See [Danish Defence Intelligence Service \(2009\)](#), *Efterretningsmæssig Risikovurdering 2009*, pp. 40–41.
- 150 On 31 July 2015, the Taliban published a 'Statement from the Leadership Council of the Islamic Emirate' regarding the appointment of Mullah Mansour. In addition to Mansour, Haibatullah Akhundzada (the current supreme leader) and Sirajuddin Haqqani were appointed as the group's deputy leaders. Mullah Omar's son, Mullah Yaqoob, and his brother, Abdul Manan, initially refused to accept Mullah Mansour's appointment, but they later declared their allegiance to him. At that time, several influential Taliban

- commanders, including Abdul Qayum Zakir (then head of the Taliban's Military Commission) and Mohammad Rasool, broke away from the movement. Mona Sheikh and Amina Khan, *Prospects of a settlement with the Afghan Taliban: Exit, peace and governance from the Taliban perspective*, 2019.
- 151 Sheikh and Khan, *Prospects of a settlement*, p. 30.
- 152 Amira Jadoon and Andrew Mines (2023), *The Islamic State in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Strategic Alliances and Rivalries*, Lynne Rienner.
- 153 Sheikh, 'Al-Qaeda's old hotbed'.
- 154 *The Voice of America*, 'Afghanistan to discuss fate of foreign IS prisoners with their countries', 3 May 2021.
- 155 *The Washington Post*, 'The top U.S. commander in Afghanistan is leaving, but the troops are staying', 13 February 2016.
- 156 At the same time, Pakistan had launched a large-scale military operation in the tribal areas in 2014, which allowed the Afghan Taliban to receive assistance from the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), which had fled to Afghanistan. Finally, a further factor contributing to the Taliban's continued mobilisation was the increase in the number of civilians killed during the Afghan government's military operations throughout 2015. For example, Human Rights Watch reported in 2016 that schools were being commandeered for military use at this time, with both insurgents (primarily the Taliban) and pro-government militias responsible. Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2016*, 2016.
- 157 The Afghan state has undergone various forms of governance, including being a monarchy, a republic and an Islamic emirate. Additionally, the state has been dominated by communist socialism, Islamism and presidential democracy. There are approximately 55 ethnic groupings, of which 14 were mentioned in the 2004 constitution. The largest groups consist of Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbeks. See Haqmal Daudzai (2021), *The State-Building Dilemma in Afghanistan*, Verlag Barbara Budrich, Budrich Academic Press, chapter 5.
- 158 Martijne van Bijlert (2009), 'Imaginary institutions: state building in Afghanistan', in *Doing Good or Doing Better: Development Policies in a Globalizing World*, edited by Monique Kremer, Peter van Lieshout, and Robert Went, Amsterdam University Press, pp. 157–176.
- 159 For poverty figures compiled during the course of the war, refer to The World Bank (n.d.), *Poverty reduction in Afghanistan: despite economic growth, widening inequality*; Asian Development Bank, 'Poverty data: Afghanistan'.
- 160 Ghulam Sakhi, 'The elections and political realignments in Afghanistan', DIIS, 29 December 2014, p. 23.
- 161 Afghanistan has not had autonomous local governments; rather, the local administrations (Mahali-e-Edara) functioned as an extension of the ministries of the central government. The provincial councils encompassed districts and villages, and the villages had informal representatives (Malik, Arbab or Qariadar) in the provincial councils. See Daudzai, *State-Building Dilemma*, chapter 5.
- 162 *Altinget*, 'Danmark allierede sig med brutale tyranner i Helmand: og skubbede afghanerne i armene på Taliban', 19 September 2023.
- 163 See the examples described in greater detail in Daudzai, *State-Building Dilemma*, chapter 6.
- 164 Sakhi, 'Elections and political realignments', p. 9.
- 165 Sakhi, 'Elections and political realignments', p. 22.
- 166 Sakhi, 'Elections and political realignments', p. 24.
- 167 Sakhi, 'Elections and political realignments', p. 14.
- 168 Sakhi, 'Elections and political realignments', p. 25.
- 169 The rationale was that Afghan farmers had no serious alternatives to crops that could be substituted for opium; The Danish Defence Intelligence Service (2006), *Situations-og trusselsvurdering for Afghanistan* (2 June).

- 170 The [Danish Defence Intelligence Service \(2015\)](#), *Ikke-klassificeret situations- og trusselsvurdering for de danske styrker til Resolute Support i Afghanistan*, p. 2, fourth paragraph.
- 171 The DDIS describes such dynamics since 2005, noting, for instance, that the government faced significant problems with unemployment, and that unemployed Afghans were among those who joined militias. [Danish Defence Intelligence Service \(2005\)](#), *Situations- og trusselsvurdering for Afghanistan*, point 5. It also reports on public demonstrations triggered by dissatisfaction with economic conditions, particularly unpaid wages and unemployment; Danish Defence Intelligence Service, *Situations- og trusselsvurdering for Afghanistan* (2006), 2 June, point 8. SIGAR, *Why the Afghan Government collapsed*, November 2022, also highlights the legitimacy challenges faced by the central government as a significant reason for its collapse.

3 Negotiations with the Taliban

Introduction

This chapter describes how the Doha Agreement – a politically negotiated agreement between the Americans and the Taliban – helped to pave the way for the Taliban military victory. The Doha Agreement was fundamentally a withdrawal agreement, which the US entered into exclusively with the Taliban on 29 February 2020, effectively bypassing the Afghan government. The agreement also stipulated that the Taliban were to engage in an intra-Afghan dialogue process with the Afghan government or other Afghan representatives to reach a power-sharing agreement.¹ Despite this process quickly faltering, the Americans chose to withdraw from Afghanistan regardless. At the same time, the chapter outlines how both the Americans and Afghanistan's neighbouring countries began to view the Taliban as a legitimate negotiating partner after the first ten years of the war. The Taliban reportedly exploited this perception and pursued a military victory instead of engaging in an intra-Afghan reconciliation process that could have ensured a broader government following the US-led withdrawal.

The chapter begins by describing the remarkable development that transpired over the two decades: From dominant international actors, including the Americans, agreeing that the Taliban should be entirely excluded from an Afghan transitional government and barred from the Bonn negotiations, to the Americans ultimately shunning the Afghan government and negotiating the terms for withdrawal in private with the Taliban. The chapter then explains how the American interest in an exit ended up giving the Taliban an advantage over the Afghan government and contributed to undermining it.

Next, the chapter illustrates how the Afghan government struggled for ownership of the Afghan peace and reconciliation process; efforts that received little international support and were overshadowed by the agendas of international and regional actors.² Throughout the 20-year period, there was a consistent absence of unified international support for an internal Afghan reconciliation process with broad representation. Additionally, this section shows how the Afghan government sought a condition-based withdrawal, whereas the Americans ultimately established and adhered to a withdrawal date.

Finally, the chapter describes how Afghanistan's regional neighbours, particularly Pakistan, Iran, China and Russia, began to compete for the role as mediator. This increased willingness to engage in dialogue with the Taliban also boosted the group's legitimacy. The regional countries that had initially supported former US President Bush's War on Terror shifted their positions significantly after President Obama announced the end of the troop surge in 2011 and introduced a new Afghanistan strategy focusing on al-Qaeda and the training of Afghan security forces.³ The dialogue-friendly approach that the neighbouring countries adopted towards the Taliban was driven by a range of factors, including their own security agendas and a growing recognition that the Taliban would play a role in the future of Afghanistan.

Source material

This chapter is primarily based on publications and reports released by the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN). AAN is an independent non-profit policy research organisation that has been operating since 2009, with an office in Kabul. AAN's publications are frequently cited, and journalists, academics and officials with an interest in Afghanistan regularly utilise their background articles and reports. A significant portion of their work relies on extensive local knowledge, linguistic skills and interviews conducted in Afghanistan, and they are affiliated with journalists, analysts and researchers. They have periodically received support from the Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and Dutch embassies or governments and are headquartered in Germany.

Information regarding negotiations is often confidential or difficult to access; this chapter therefore also draws on media articles and contributions from key actors. Additionally, it cites a SIGAR report entitled *Why the Afghan government collapsed* (2022), as well as previous DIIS reports (2013, 2019) investigating the negotiations with the Taliban, which have also been based on interviews with the Taliban and expert insights into the negotiation processes.

Background: Negotiations without, with and *only with* the Taliban

The Doha Agreement has been described as one of the primary reasons for the rapid Taliban advance in the final phase of the war.⁴ In contrast to the predominant focus on terrorism and counterinsurgency, the peace process – or more precisely, the various types of peace initiatives – received relatively little attention. Throughout the 20 years, this focus was not central to the international effort, although some foundational steps were taken early on (notably, the exclusion of the Taliban from the Bonn negotiations), which the Americans attempted to reverse in the final phase of the war.⁵ American policy underwent a radical transformation over the course of events, evolving from a complete rejection of any dialogue with the Taliban to an exclusive agreement *solely* with the Taliban.

The various initiatives occurred at different levels (some national, others regional) and involved a range of actors (the initiatives were bilateral, trilateral and multilateral), without a plan for an *Afghan* peace agreement under the auspices of the United Nations. These initiatives encompassed everything from the reconciliation and reintegration of former Taliban fighters to *track II* negotiations in major European cities, direct negotiations between the US and the Taliban leadership in Doha, and less successful attempts at national reconciliation.⁶ While there was a UN track (the Bonn Process) in the early phase of the war, an exclusive US–Taliban track and a fragmented dialogue track facilitated by regional neighbours dominated the final phase. The intra-Afghan negotiations, which were supposed to address issues such as a ceasefire and the potential structure of a future government, never truly gained traction.

The Bonn Agreement, reached in December 2001, was part of the UN framework and aimed to establish a transitional administration following the fall of the Taliban, ultimately leading to a new government.⁷ One of the main issues highlighted in existing evaluations is the exclusion of the Taliban from this process.⁸ This resulted in the Northern Alliance – one of the factions in the Afghan civil war in the 1990s – gaining disproportionate power, while the Pashtun majority was not adequately represented (this was later adjusted, and the discontent among Pashtuns can also be interpreted as indicative of how they did not receive the disproportionate amount of power to which they were accustomed). Nevertheless, the Taliban could gain legitimacy by being critical of the new power holders, who had a history of gross human rights violations during the civil war period.⁹ The drafting of a new Afghan constitution in 2004 (which stemmed from a commission mandated by the Bonn Agreement) emphasised the establishment of a central authority; however, informal power structures continued to exist, and they influenced the political landscape.¹⁰ The former warlords (who were not disarmed) secured significant power positions at the local level, in the provinces, in parliament and within the government.¹¹ Although Hamid Karzai was Pashtun, the Bonn Agreement did not favour Pashtuns in the south concerning political influence, which in turn strengthened the Taliban in those areas.¹²

Some analyses suggest that the problem with the Bonn Agreement was not its content, but rather that it was never fully implemented. Afghanistan has historically maintained a pluralistic political environment, the population largely organised along ethnic lines. Pro-democratic, left-leaning and Islamist factions have been active and organised civil society and political actors. Thus, according to an AAN analysis, it was not the ‘foreign’ nature of the democratisation that was the issue, but rather the failure to implement it.¹³ Instead, power remained concentrated in the hands of a few, who were favoured by foreign actors (both the US and regional neighbours), which alienated significant portions of the rural population from the power elite in Kabul.¹⁴ Consequently, the new government faced challenges regarding its legitimacy; not least an image of being installed by foreign powers, but also corruption, nepotism, fragmentation and as being a weak authority.¹⁵

Despite the UN framework having initiated the Bonn process, the US dominated it.¹⁶ The American involvement in the early years raised several key issues,

which ultimately became the seeds of greater challenges. For example, President Bush and his special envoy in Kabul, Zalmay Khalilzad, made the final decision in 2004 to employ a non-partisan electoral system for the presidential election. A significant opportunity was lost when several high-ranking Taliban members, including former Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil, returned to Afghanistan and expressed their interest in participating in the new political system. However, President Karzai and the US did not permit them to establish a Taliban party.¹⁷ The very late adoption of legislation concerning political parties and a complicated registration process meant that only five parties were officially registered by that time – these parties alone legally being able to present candidates for the 2004 presidential election. Moreover, the constitution forbade ethnic political parties, despite ethnic identity playing a crucial role in Afghanistan.¹⁸ Such conditions did not encourage democratic participation; rather, they created new divisions. Trust in the democratic system generally declined over the 20-year period, which the voter turnout clearly reflected: Approximately 70% for the 2004 presidential election,¹⁹ while falling below 20% in 2019.²⁰

Regardless of the power dynamics and American dominance during the Bonn negotiations (and afterwards),²¹ the failure to reconcile the conflicting parties proved a poor foundation for the state-building project. The close cooperation between international troops and anti-Taliban factions further rendered the Bonn Agreement a fragile and unrepresentative starting point. Some analyses have described the initial decision to treat the Taliban on par with al-Qaeda and excluding them from political negotiations from the outset as one of the major mistakes made in Afghanistan, and that a different approach could have brought the international presence to an end already in late 2001.²² Although the UN played a role in the Bonn negotiations, there was no subsequent focus on achieving an *Afghan* peace agreement. It is significant that the UN did not deploy any peacekeeping forces to enforce an internal peace agreement in Afghanistan over the 20 years, precisely because no such agreement ever truly came to the table.²³ When the Taliban regained power in 2021, some argued that it was time for the UN to assume a stronger role. The prevailing counterarguments were also made, however – as had been the case for the previous 20 years – that Afghanistan lacked a peace agreement to implement, had no clear peace process, and that there was no ceasefire to monitor.²⁴

During the Obama administration, leading up to the transition to RSM in 2014, the Americans began speaking in earnest about an *exit strategy* (initially starting back in 2009, shortly before the troop surge), and the objective of defeating the Taliban militarily gradually receded.²⁵ During Obama's presidency, the US started exploring options for dialogue with the Taliban.²⁶ The establishment of an office for political representation in Doha in 2012 (initially informal and later formalised), where the Taliban could meet with American and regional delegations, signified the shift that was occurring: The Taliban were no longer to be viewed solely as an object of counter-terrorism (CT) or counter-insurgency but also as a political actor that had to be included in the equation and in discussions regarding the future of Afghanistan.

The American exit plan culminated in the Doha Agreement in February 2020 and, subsequently, in the Taliban's military victory over the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and the collapse of the Afghan government.²⁷ The agreement stipulated that the Americans would withdraw from Afghanistan within 14 months; in return, the Taliban were to ensure that Afghan territory would not be used to orchestrate attacks on American interests.²⁸ At the same time, the agreement included provisions for the initiation of a national reconciliation process, allowing the Taliban and representatives of the incumbent government to discuss what would occur following the withdrawal of international troops. The agreement created uncertainty regarding whether the Americans would indeed withdraw within the specified 14-month timeframe, or whether the withdrawal would depend on the fulfilment of certain conditions, including a defined process for intra-Afghan dialogue and an agreement on the political situation following the withdrawal. Some interpreted the text of the agreement as indicative of a clearly 'conditional' approach, which they deemed unrealistic, given that efforts towards intra-Afghan dialogue and national reconciliation appeared bleak at that time.

In certain diplomatic circles and within the Afghan government, there was uncertainty in the months leading up to the Taliban takeover about whether the withdrawal would actually occur; apart from the Taliban and the Americans, no one knew for certain who had conducted negotiations in isolation.²⁹ A report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), published after the Taliban takeover, outlined several reasons for this confusion. Among other things, conflicting statements emerged from both the US embassy in Kabul and the negotiation team led by the chief American negotiator, Zalmay Khalilzad, who was engaged in discussions with the Taliban in Doha. Embassy staff were critical of the prospect of an American withdrawal and the potential for the Taliban to assume power, sending signals that, according to the report, differed from those communicated by the American team in Doha.³⁰

Presidents Obama, Trump and Biden all signalled their intention for a US exit during their respective administrations. President Trump in particular had made it very clear during his term that he wanted to withdraw from Afghanistan. In the months leading up to the withdrawal, there was even a significant reduction in the number of private security contractors. Between April and July 2021, the number of private security personnel working for the Americans halved (from 2,850 to 1,400, only 466 of whom were armed), indicating that the Americans were serious this time.³¹

Existing reviews of various initiatives aimed at pursuing a political track suggest that these efforts were counterproductive in preventing the Taliban from taking over.³² The American withdrawal agreement (Doha) strengthened the Taliban faith in a military victory being achievable. According to an expert from the Afghanistan Analyst Network (AAN), military victory appeared to be the Taliban Plan A, whereas negotiations with the Afghan government were their Plan B.³³ During the Doha negotiations, however, no one really knew what the Taliban's fundamental plan was.³⁴

At the same time, the initiatives taken by regional neighbouring countries that were driven by their own national interests ultimately also benefited the Taliban. The peace process was generally fraught with challenges, particularly concerning a lack of inclusivity (the Taliban were initially excluded from negotiations, whereas the incumbent Afghan government was excluded towards the end), a lack of international coordination (the peace initiatives became an arena for international competition for the influential mediator role), and an overall insufficient focus on what would actually happen when the Americans withdrew.³⁵ The aftermath of the withdrawal appeared to catch both the Afghan government and the NATO countries involved (apart from the US) unprepared, despite several indications since 2011 that international involvement was on the decline, with a shift away from the objective of defeating and excluding the Taliban.

The American negotiations detached the Afghan government from the process

The American policy of not distinguishing between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, which stemmed from the declaration of war against the Taliban on 7 October, changed in 2010. In the initial phase of the war, the Americans refused to engage in amnesty negotiations with the Taliban, which pushed them closer to Pakistan for protection.³⁶ It was not until March 2009 that President Obama proposed the then-controversial idea of reaching out to moderate elements within the Afghan Taliban. Initially, this initiative was more about reintegrating lower-ranking Taliban loyalists through economic incentives than it was about establishing a formal peace agreement.³⁷

Direct dialogue between US and the Taliban

The following year (November 2010), direct dialogue took place between the US and the Taliban in Munich, with both Germany and Qatar involved in mediation efforts that were seen as confidence-building measures.³⁸ In February 2011, negotiations began in Doha (Qatar) regarding a prisoner exchange: Five Guantánamo detainees in exchange for one American soldier. The dialogue continued later that year in Germany.³⁹ In 2012, the confidence-building measures resumed in Qatar, along with discussions about the potential prisoner exchange agreement. The negotiations broke down later that year, however, reportedly due to disagreements over whether the released Taliban detainees should be monitored by Qatar together with opposition from the US Congress. Meanwhile, American special forces killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in May 2011, allowing the Americans to declare on the home front that the mission was a success, despite the special operation taking place in Pakistan. But the special forces had been dispatched from Afghanistan and returned to Afghanistan with Osama bin Laden's body. Consequently, there was a fortunate coincidence in timing, as the Americans could declare the mission a success while at the same time increasing their willingness to engage in dialogue with the Taliban.

The first series of negotiations, ‘Doha I’, thus took place between 2009 and 2014, during which time the Taliban established their office for political representation in Doha.⁴⁰ By the time direct negotiations between the US and the Taliban commenced in 2018, the Taliban had been de facto recognised as a central actor in the war. This recognition came at the expense of the Afghan government, which was sidelined due to Taliban insistence and American acceptance that direct negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government could not occur until a signed bilateral US–Taliban agreement regarding the withdrawal of American troops was in place.

The government sidetracked

On 23 October 2017, the US signalled that it was again ready to negotiate.⁴¹ In an open letter, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid responded on 14 February 2018, indicating that the Taliban were also prepared to engage. This marked the beginning of the Doha Agreement, although the first meeting between the US and the Taliban took place on 28 July 2018, leading to negotiations throughout the autumn of that year.⁴² At the same time, the Taliban increased its attacks – some sources reported an 86% rise in Taliban assaults against Afghan forces and a 69% increase in the ANDSF attacks against the Taliban.⁴³ The attacks and the spike in the level of violence highlighted that the Doha negotiations had no peaceful impact on the ground in Afghanistan. It remained unclear what the Taliban truly aimed to achieve – whether they sought total victory or intended to negotiate a power-sharing arrangement once the foreign troops withdrew from the country.

Negotiations between the Taliban and the Americans collapsed in 2019 but were resumed in February 2020, culminating in the final withdrawal agreement, the Doha Agreement. Just a week later, on 29 February 2020, the level of Taliban violence against the ANDSF surged again, whereas the ANDSF attacks against the Taliban were at a historic low. There were clear signs at the time of Taliban military superiority, both their aggressive campaign against Afghan forces and the significant reduction in the ANDSF’s offensive capabilities.⁴⁴ The ANDSF no longer received the American air support upon which they had previously relied, while at the same time, media articles emerged about a notable CT collaboration between the Taliban and American air forces against their common enemy: The Islamic State (a collaboration confirmed by Trump).⁴⁵

The American negotiations with the Taliban were conducted in isolation, much to the frustration of both Afghan President Hamid Karzai and, subsequently, the Ashraf Ghani government. It is also worth noting that these negotiations did not involve other NATO countries; the US was acting unilaterally. In 2011, the US announced that the Taliban were now willing to negotiate through a political office in Qatar. This reportedly irritated Karzai, who felt that the international partners had hijacked the process and believed that it should be led by Afghanistan rather than by the US or Qatar.⁴⁶ Along with Bahrain and Kuwait, Qatar is the closest American ally in the Persian Gulf, and the largest American base in the Middle East is

located in Doha.⁴⁷ The text of the agreement was predicated on the establishment of a new 'Islamic' governmental constellation in Afghanistan, to be negotiated by Afghan parties, with the Taliban included. Thus, the wording in the Doha Agreement stipulating a 'new post-settlement Afghan Islamic government as determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations'⁴⁸ did not sit well with the Afghan government.

The Doha process (aka. Doha II) and the exclusive US–Taliban track followed Afghan President Ghani's proposal for negotiations with the Taliban in February 2018. He suggested transforming the Taliban into a political party and that a ceasefire could pave the way for dialogue. The conditions were that the Taliban should accept the Afghan constitution and sever ties with terrorist groups (primarily referring to al-Qaeda and other transnational jihadist networks).⁴⁹ In the wake of Ghani's statements, a larger peace conference involving Muslim scholars took place, and – for the first time – the Taliban responded by declaring a ceasefire during Eid, the Muslim holiday. The ceasefire ended after three days, however, and the Taliban ignored Ghani's call for an extension (and subsequently also his request for a new ceasefire in August).

The Taliban declared themselves victors

The Taliban did not recognise the Ghani government, and contrasting reports emerged regarding their true intentions at the time: Were they genuinely interested in dialogue and reconciliation with the Afghan government?⁵⁰ In a notable op-ed for *The New York Times*, the Taliban's second-in-command, Haqqani, stated – nine days before the Doha Agreement was finalised – that the Taliban were aware of the debate concerning the next steps. However, he simultaneously remarked that 'it will depend on a consensus among Afghans. We should not let our worries get in the way of a process of genuine discussion and deliberation free for the first time from foreign domination and interference'.⁵¹ Once again, the Taliban's plans for the post-Doha Agreement period were unclear.⁵²

On one hand, the three-day ceasefire sparked speculation concerning the potential momentum for a genuine Afghan peace process; on the other, the Taliban showed no real interest in engaging with Afghan government representatives. Following the brief ceasefire, the Taliban publicly demanded direct negotiations with the Americans – bypassing the Afghan government. The Americans acquiesced to this request. At the time, the Taliban's clearest statements were about keeping the two negotiation tracks separate: The intra-Afghan dialogue and the talks with the Americans.⁵³ The argument was that foreign powers should not interfere in negotiations regarding Afghanistan's future.

The Taliban negotiation team in Doha was led by two of the group's powerful leaders, Abdul Ghani Baradar and Sher Mohammed Abas Stanekzai. Baradar was released by Pakistani authorities (under pressure from the US) as part of the initial negotiations. Additionally, the US persuaded the Afghan government to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners in exchange for 1,000 prisoners held by the Taliban.

Shortly after the Doha Agreement was signed, the Taliban leader declared them the victors of the war.⁵⁴ The SIGAR report on the reasons for the collapse of the Afghan government describes how the Afghan government felt undermined by the Americans. The process was perceived as a legitimisation of the Taliban, which simultaneously strengthened their argument that the Afghan government was merely an American instrument that they could disregard at will.⁵⁵ At that time, the ANDSF leadership also opened up to new offers and agreements, as trust in the Americans had waned. SIGAR describes how the Afghan government representatives attempted to mediate between ANDSF and Taliban commanders because the dynamics had changed so significantly and distrust of the Americans had increased.⁵⁶

The Doha Agreement was signed on 29 February 2020, and it was agreed that the Taliban would meet with the Ghani government no later than 10 March of the same year. The day after signing Doha, Ghani declared that he would not accept the terms for further prisoner exchanges as they were outlined in the agreement. The Taliban responded by announcing that they would resume their attacks, and the 10 March deadline was not met.⁵⁷

Intra-Afghan initiatives and the struggle for ownership

Hamid Karzai, who won over 50% of the vote in the first Afghan presidential election following the fall of the Taliban in 2004, announced shortly after his victory that he would distinguish between ordinary Taliban supporters and those who caused unrest. He introduced an amnesty and reintegration initiative in 2005, the Programme Tahkim-e Solh (PTS), which sought to encourage local Taliban commanders to lay down their arms and distance themselves from al-Qaeda.⁵⁸ This initiative achieved limited success, and challenges related to corruption and insufficient support ultimately led to its failure. Also internationally, there was little support for the initiative, which was primarily a response to excessive foreign interference, particularly from the Americans. Karzai was already speaking at that time of the need for an Afghan-led peace process that would be free of foreign interference.⁵⁹

In October 2010, the Afghan government established the High Peace Council (HPC) to initiate a dialogue process with the Taliban leadership, and the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Programme (APRP) was simultaneously launched as part of this effort. The latter was a resumption of Karzai's earlier attempts, but the project quickly faltered when the Taliban assassinated HPC leader Burhanuddin Rabbani in September 2011. Rabbani was considered one of the Taliban's historical adversaries from the civil war era, and the Taliban did not regard him to be a neutral facilitator. Informal dialogue in the form of *Track II* meetings involving lower-ranking representatives of the warring Afghan parties was slowly resumed the following year in Japan and France.⁶⁰

Focus on conditions for withdrawal

In December 2011, 10 years after the original Bonn Conference, Afghanistan hosted what became known as *Bonn II*. For the Afghan government, the

conference was aimed at securing ongoing donor support beyond 2014.⁶¹ Pakistan did not attend, as NATO had been responsible for an airstrike on Pakistani territory just days prior, resulting in the deaths of 26 Pakistani soldiers.⁶² Bonn II can be viewed as having seeded the ‘conditions-based’ approach to international withdrawal that the Afghan government sought: This meant that the Afghan government was after international assurances that efforts would be made to prevent a collapse when the international forces withdrew. This stood in contrast to the timeline-based withdrawal that the Americans ultimately followed, although the Doha Agreement was ambiguous on this point: It outlined both a timeframe for withdrawal (14 months) and certain conditions that the Taliban would need to fulfil, including participation in an intra-Afghan reconciliation process. The large-scale international conferences and the promises and declarations that emerged from them thus moved in a different direction than the Doha process, establishing the ambiguity that led segments of the Afghan government apparatus to doubt the international exit.

A similar donor conference took place in Tokyo the following year (8 July 2012), where international partners reaffirmed their ongoing commitment to the country.⁶³ The countries involved in the ISAF-mission pledged to support development in Afghanistan for 10 years (2015–24) from the point when the ISAF mission would transition to the Resolute Support Mission (RSM). This was reiterated at a summit in Chicago between Afghanistan and the countries that had contributed to ISAF. The long-term commitment – to support everything from governance structures, security and the peace process to economic development – was sought by the Afghan government, which feared being abandoned.⁶⁴

Although Pakistan was absent from Bonn II, it made its mark on another plan announced the following year. In December 2012, the Afghan government – under Pakistani influence⁶⁵ – launched the ‘Peace Process Roadmap to 2015’, which aimed to pave the path to peace with the Taliban and other insurgent groups before the end of 2014, when ISAF would cease operations.⁶⁶

The introduction outlines an ambitious vision for the post-2014 era:

By 2015 Taliban, Hizb-e Islami and other armed groups will have given up armed opposition, transformed from military entities into political groups, and are actively participating in the country’s political and constitutional processes, including national election. Afghanistan’s political system remains inclusive, democratic, and equitable, where all political actors co-exist and promote their political goals and aspirations peacefully under the constitution. NATO/ISAF forces will have departed from Afghanistan, leaving the ANSF as the only legitimate armed forces.⁶⁷

The ‘Peace Process Roadmap’ proposed that Pakistan and the US would play key facilitating roles, while Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UK were also mentioned as relevant parties to involve. This never occurred, as the US and Pakistan instead continued along their own paths.

The internal dialogue fell apart

In July 2015, Pakistan hosted what came to be known as the ‘Murree Peace Process’, which was the first direct meeting between the Taliban and the HPC. However, the Taliban maintained their position and were fundamentally uninterested in reaching any agreement before the Americans had withdrawn. Moreover, the Pakistani process revealed a rift between the Taliban members who were close to Pakistan versus the Taliban political office in Qatar, which was dissatisfied with the new Taliban leader (Mullah Akhtar Mansour) sending a delegation to the meeting.⁶⁸

However, according to an AAN report, the Afghan government was pleased that Pakistan was attempting to revive the peace process, as their own efforts to engage Taliban leaders had failed.⁶⁹ While the Pakistani attempts ultimately proved another dead end, a different peace agreement was signed in September 2016 with Pakistan as a mediator: A genuine peace agreement – indeed, the only one throughout the 15 years of conflict – reached between Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of the former *mujahideen* movement Hezb-e Islami, and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.

The Taliban position in Doha back in 2015 was for a complete separation of the agreement they were to make with the Americans from the issue of national reconciliation, further insisting that the former should be addressed first. In other words, no internal Afghan dialogue until foreign troops were gone.

Between 2016 and 2018, several informal meetings took place between the Taliban and HPC representatives. In 2018, the HPC and President Ghani announced the government’s willingness to allow the Taliban to establish a political office in Kabul to initiate negotiations. However, the Afghan government remained uneasy about the American-led process in Qatar. Meetings also occurred involving religious scholars in Bogor (Indonesia), Kabul and Mecca in an attempt at calling the Taliban to national reconciliation.⁷⁰ But the Taliban opted for the Americans, and the final Doha process commenced.

The intensified Taliban attacks in 2020, which persisted after the signing of the Doha Agreement, constituted a breach of the accord. Ghani maintained his stance that he believed the Taliban should be integrated into the Afghan system and participate as a political party. The parties met in Doha in September 2020, but neither side was interested in an agreement; the Taliban were aware that the Americans were in the process of withdrawing and felt no need to compromise due to their advantageous position, while Ghani was betting that the upcoming American elections would bring about a shift in the American withdrawal plan.⁷¹

Rejection of power sharing

Despite several meetings between the Taliban and representatives of the Ghani government, they could not agree on the agenda for the discussions; Ghani wanted to talk about a ceasefire, whereas the Taliban insisted on the establishment of an Islamic government in Afghanistan. The Americans intervened by proposing a new peace plan to which Khalilzad had contributed. This plan suggested a ceasefire, a

new constitution, Ghani's resignation and the establishment of a transitional government that included the Taliban. It also proposed the formation of a new advisory governmental body to accommodate the Taliban demands for an Islamic government (a 'High Council for Islamic Jurisprudence'). Ghani rejected the plan, proposing instead one that scheduled the elections sooner.⁷²

American special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad also suggested offering the Taliban a so-called 50/50 government – a government divided between the Taliban and the incumbent Afghan government. Khalilzad attempted to broker a power-sharing agreement just weeks before the Taliban takeover. As time progressed, however, the power-sharing proposal increasingly tilted in favour of the Taliban. As Khalilzad remarked in an interview, 'Power-sharing was less than 50% for the government in that situation because Kabul was surrounded by the Taliban, but more than 10 ministers of the republic were discussed for inclusion in the government'.⁷³ The failed American plans were termed 'Bonn-style', referencing the original Bonn Agreement concerning a transitional government. Ghani rejected this, according to several news reports, insisting on transferring power through elections. Analysts described this as an American attempt to rectify the 'mistake' made in the Bonn negotiations and to establish a new transitional government, this time with the Taliban as a participating party.⁷⁴

A report issued by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) outlines three instances in which the US could have acted differently instead of negotiating when the Taliban were at their strongest. The first instance was in 2001–02, when the Taliban were on the run. There was consensus regarding the War on Terror, and the Taliban were keen to maintain some influence. The second instance occurred in 2009–11, when the Americans had intensified their military pressure. At this time, there was a split within the Taliban (as described in the previous chapter), and a new president sought direct US–Taliban negotiations. The third instance was in 2019–20, when the Taliban were eager to reach an agreement that would ensure the withdrawal of American troops. Here, the Taliban easily circumvented a committed dialogue with the Afghan government. The explanations for not seizing the moment include the perception during the Bonn process that there was no need to reach out to the enemy. In the second instance, the Taliban's strength and ability to sustain mobilisation were underestimated, while in the final instance, it was due to the Americans prioritising troop withdrawal over an internal Afghan peace agreement.⁷⁵

The regional neighbours compete for the mediator role

In addition to the Doha process and unsuccessful intra-Afghan initiatives, the approach of the regional neighbour countries towards the Taliban – including their increasing willingness to engage in dialogue – played a significant role in the leeway granted to the Taliban from 2011 onwards. The regional neighbours competed for the mediation role with each other and with the US, which particularly benefited the Taliban. The War on Terror initially garnered support from among Afghanistan's regional neighbours, including Pakistan (and Saudi Arabia), which had previously supported and recognised the Taliban. Russia, represented

by Vladimir Putin, who had communicated multiple times with George W. Bush during the planning of the War in Afghanistan, also backed the US War on Terror, helping to facilitate the negotiations with Central Asian countries and fully accepting the American military presence in its area of interest in Central Asia. Similarly, Iran and China formally and informally supported the US and declared their support for the War on Terror.⁷⁶

This support was not unequivocal and changed over time, however, as American interests and those of the regional powers did not always align regarding the path forward in Afghanistan.⁷⁷ At the same time, the regional neighbours adjusted their strategies as the Americans became more open to dialogue. These neighbours had a vested interest in ensuring access to Afghanistan's future power holders and in avoiding attacks from transnational jihadists within their own territories. The resilience of the Taliban combined with the American withdrawal plan prompted several countries to revise their strategies.

The regional interests and approaches towards the Taliban are pertinent, as they expanded the Taliban's room for manoeuvre.⁷⁸ Thus, the regional neighbours focused on what would happen once the Americans and NATO were eventually removed from the equation: A competition to establish relations with those who appeared to be an unavoidable part of the Afghan reality; namely, the Taliban.

The events of 9/11 and the subsequent US-led intervention resulted in a short-lived consensus among the regional powers. Over time, this consensus was challenged. Regional approaches to the Taliban gained momentum, particularly after 2011. In 2012, for instance, President Karzai met with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad along with the Pakistani president and prime minister to discuss regional peace.⁷⁹ Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan agreed to establish a joint peace commission and labelled it 'Afghanistan-led', despite Pakistan positioning itself as the facilitator. Trilateral negotiations regarding the peace process and cooperation also occurred among Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2010,⁸⁰ between the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2015,⁸¹ and in 2019 between China, the US and Russia.⁸² In 2017, Russia initiated what became known as the Moscow Format: A meeting ground for representatives from six countries (China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, India and Afghanistan), later also including Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) and Taliban representatives in 2018. These meetings primarily aimed to consolidate agreement on addressing the security challenges stemming from transnational jihadists that the countries collectively identified. In addition to al-Qaeda, this included regional movements such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, East Turkestan Islamic Movement, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, and the Islamic State's Khorasan branch from 2014 onwards.⁸³

Pakistan

Pakistan had a particular stake in facilitating the Afghan Taliban and occupying the mediator role, especially since it had been grappling with the emergence of organised Taliban loyalists since 2004. In 2007, these loyalists established themselves

as a government-hostile umbrella organisation of Pakistani Taliban movements (Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, TTP).⁸⁴ Pakistan did not regard the Afghan Taliban as the sole solution to the situation in Afghanistan, which is why, in the lead-up to the Taliban takeover, Pakistan supported Zalmay Khalilzad's idea of offering them a 50/50 government. Meanwhile, in Islamabad, efforts were underway to avoid a purely Taliban-led government, aiming to include figures such as Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah in the future political landscape of Afghanistan.⁸⁵

Pakistan's role in Afghanistan has often been characterised by accusations of double-dealing, particularly concerning its relationships with the Haqqani Network and the Mullah Omar-led Quetta Shura.⁸⁶ Pakistan has attempted to balance its alliance with the US regarding to its own security interests, seeking to avoid the war spilling into its territory.⁸⁷ However, American influence has significantly shaped some of Pakistan's decisions throughout the process. In 2013, for instance, Pakistan released the former deputy commander and co-founder of the Taliban, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, in response to massive American pressure.⁸⁸ As previously noted, the Americans required a negotiating partner capable of effectively engaging with their base. Mullah Baradar became the Americans' dialogue partner in Qatar and played a key role in advancing the Doha Agreement from the Taliban's side.

Throughout the course of the war, Pakistan thus had a significant domestic political incentive to maintain a positive relationship with the Afghan Taliban, particularly with the Haqqani Network.⁸⁹ Since 2007, the largest Pakistani Taliban grouping, the TTP, had turned its guns against the Pakistani army and government. Consequently, the motivation for a targeted Pakistani military operation against the Haqqani Network was extremely limited, as it would exacerbate the internal threat. At the same time, the connections between the Pakistani military intelligence service and key figures in the Haqqani Network provided a potential opportunity for negotiation with the Taliban factions that had turned against Pakistan. In this delicate interplay, the mediating role played by the Haqqani leadership was invaluable for Pakistan.⁹⁰ Until 2007, when the TTP emerged as an internal threat, Pakistani security actors had supported the Afghan Taliban; however, they also supported the Haqqani Network and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's militia, Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin, both directly and indirectly from 2001 onwards.⁹¹ Following this period, their policy was increasingly about a hands-off strategy aimed at distinguishing between the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban and avoiding the exacerbation of the domestic political threat by treating them the same. Pakistan's involvement in mediation and dialogue with the Taliban in Afghanistan was therefore primarily about managing the internal political threat.

Russia

Several countries beyond Pakistan were involved in regional attempts at negotiations. In 2013, for instance, the Russians initiated dialogue with the Taliban, but also with Northern Alliance warlords and politicians.⁹² This led to several Track II conferences, where Russia particularly engaged regional actors and representatives from various Afghan factions. The Russian efforts culminated in a conference

in Moscow in 2019, attended by senior Taliban leaders alongside former President Karzai and hundreds of representatives from the Afghan political landscape.⁹³ While President Ghani did not attend, former government representatives did. The Moscow conference followed statements by President Trump indicating his intention to end the American military presence after more than 17 years: 'Great nations do not fight endless wars', as he had stated in his 2019 State of the Union address.⁹⁴ This reflects the impact of American statements on regional actors.

Russia played a role in placing intra-Afghan dialogue on the agenda while simultaneously delivering a pointed message to the Americans to conduct a more inclusive process, involving not only the Taliban but also representatives from Afghan society more broadly. Although Russia was behind the initiative, the Moscow conference in 2019 was framed as 'Afghan-led' and free from 'foreign intervention'.⁹⁵ Since 2001, Russia had been in continuous contact with China regarding Central Asia and Afghanistan, particularly within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).⁹⁶ From 2010, Russia established close ties with Pakistan, India and Iran, which, along with China, came to be referred to in Afghanistan as 'The Big Four'.⁹⁷

Similar to Pakistan, Russia supported the war immediately after 9/11 without directly participating in it. As discussed in the next chapter, the US required base facilities for search and rescue teams in Uzbekistan and utilised a base in Tajikistan to fly in emergency aid and personnel when the war commenced. Russia, which had good connections with Uzbekistan, exerted effective influence over the regime, which in turn imposed significant demands on the US for access to these base facilities.⁹⁸ Russia primarily sent humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, and its security concerns focused on preventing the spread of jihadism into Central Asia and combating heroin smuggling from Afghanistan, which had become an escalating issue in both Russia and Central Asia. Russian support for the American effort, along with its relatively passive role, persisted throughout the first half of the 2010s, when Russia shifted its Afghanistan policy towards active engagement in the regional peace negotiations. This change in direction, coupled with disillusionment with American global politics, was intensified by President Obama's announcement of an exit strategy and the reduced American combat troop numbers.⁹⁹ Consequently, the Taliban were able to benefit from a more favourable regional environment. The developments in Syria after 2011 (with Russian intervention from 2015) and in Ukraine after 2014 significantly challenged the cooperation between Russia and NATO forces in Afghanistan. The growing distrust resulted in Russia prioritising regional collaboration as a bulwark against the spread of jihadism.¹⁰⁰ The regionalisation of the Russian approach to Afghanistan focused on strengthening their cooperation with Iran, China, India and Pakistan. At the same time, much like for the Americans, it reflected the perception of IS as a greater threat than the Taliban.¹⁰¹

Iran

Iran has played an ambivalent role as a regional supporter of the Taliban. Like Pakistan, Iran has navigated between the War on Terror (which it initially supported)

and shifting national security priorities. Iran was one of the Middle Eastern countries that explicitly condemned the 9/11 terrorist attacks. During ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’, Iran assisted the Americans in bridging connections with the Northern Alliance to oust the Taliban regime.¹⁰² Iran also played a significant role during the Bonn Conference and in establishing the interim government,¹⁰³ and it had an interest in the defeat of the Taliban (and was also an adversary of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq). Iran therefore decided to support the US engagement in Afghanistan. At this time, President Mohammad Khatami sent reconciliatory signals and calls for ‘dialogue among civilisations’, and there was broad support in Iran for cooperation with the US from both conservative and reform-oriented factions.¹⁰⁴

However, tensions quickly emerged. Iran has maintained a strained relationship with the US, not least due to George W. Bush’s famous State of the Union address in 2002, in which he articulated Iran, North Korea and Iraq as forming an ‘Axis of Evil’. Despite the speech being met with bewilderment and outrage from both the Iranian leadership and Iranian society more broadly, Iran’s constructive cooperation continued. However, factions within the Bush administration, particularly in the Pentagon and Vice President Richard Cheney’s office, rejected any collaboration or dialogue with Iran.¹⁰⁵

Iran considers parts of western Afghanistan, particularly Herat Province, as within its sphere of interest.¹⁰⁶ Iran quickly became one of the larger donors to Afghan reconstruction, supporting Hamid Karzai’s government, which consisted of prominent mujahideen from the Northern Alliance.¹⁰⁷ Iran invested \$570 million¹⁰⁸ in Afghanistan from 2002, adding another \$100 million in 2006 and constructing a university for an additional \$100 million in 2009.¹⁰⁹ By 2006, there were approximately 2,000 Iranian private enterprises operating in Afghanistan, especially in Herat.¹¹⁰ Herat’s special status for Iran resulted in ongoing investments in the province.¹¹¹ Despite Iranian support for the Afghan central government and its own interests in Herat, its actions in Afghanistan have been ambiguous (see the chapter on the development and strength of the Taliban). The Iran–US relationship became increasingly tense, and IS attacked Iran in 2017, making a rapprochement with the Taliban attractive to Iranians – particularly from the perspective that ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’.¹¹²

China

The same type of concern was evident in China, which was primarily focused on its border with Afghanistan adjacent to Xinjiang, where the country has long pursued a hardline policy towards Uighurs and other ethnic groups with strong ties to Central Asian countries.¹¹³ At the same time, Western China shares a 76 km border with Afghanistan. When Barack Obama announced in May 2014 that the US would withdraw all combat troops from Afghanistan by 2015, China escalated its engagement in Afghanistan (China had already begun to do so after Obama’s announcement of his exit strategy in 2011 but significantly intensified its involvement in 2015).¹¹⁴ China appointed a special diplomat to support the negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. As described, SCO served as a forum for dialogue on Afghanistan, and its annual meetings could serve to invite

Afghan dialogue partners, including the Taliban, to negotiations, which occurred in China in 2017.¹¹⁵ Agreements were reached, according to which China would not replace US troops but would offer support through other forms of security projects, including the training of Afghan security forces.¹¹⁶ The strong Chinese reaction to Obama's 2014 announcement regarding troop withdrawal was primarily due to its interest in security and stability in the region.¹¹⁷ While China was displeased with having US and NATO troops stationed on its western border, it supported the US response to the 9/11 attacks from the outset. China believed that the Muslim separatist groups in Xinjiang collaborated with transnational jihadists just across the Afghan border, thus aligning Chinese and American interests in combating these networks. Consequently, China was satisfied with US and NATO troops attempting to combat jihadists. Over time, China became particularly concerned about issues in northern Afghanistan, where foreign fighters from China and the Central Asian republics had sought refuge after fighting in Syria and Iraq.¹¹⁸ Additionally, the situation in Afghanistan played a crucial role in China's large-scale Silk Road project (now known as the Belt and Road Initiative, BRI), which was announced in 2013 and aimed at economic expansion.¹¹⁹ A key pillar of this gigantic project was the corridor through Pakistan, which runs close to the Afghan border. China's interest in Afghanistan was therefore twofold: To minimise the spillover effects of jihadism and, pragmatically, to ensure good relations with the ruling powers in Afghanistan to continue its economic projects. As a result, China became involved in regional dialogue initiatives even as its relationship with the US became increasingly strained.¹²⁰

Conclusion

This chapter has described how it remains unclear whether the Taliban were genuinely interested in a power-sharing agreement at any point, or if they were solely focused on achieving total military victory following Obama's announced troop reductions and outreach to the Taliban in 2011. The Taliban never explicitly expressed any interest in power-sharing, indicating instead that they wanted to separate the two peace tracks: One concerning the American withdrawal and the other concerning internal Afghan reconciliation. Of interest here is how power sharing with the Taliban as an (indispensable) party was a prominent aspect of the American efforts in the war's concluding phase.

The proceedings surrounding the negotiations also reveal ambiguities regarding whether the Americans, under Trump and later Biden, planned to withdraw from Afghanistan *regardless* of the status of the intra-Afghan dialogue process, or if the Taliban behaviour – specifically the escalation of their attacks on the ANDSF – after Doha in 2020 took the Americans by surprise. Regardless, the Americans did not respond to the Taliban advances, possibly because three consecutive American presidents had declared their intention to withdraw from Afghanistan.

Finally, this chapter has described how it is unclear why neither the UN nor NATO played a role in ensuring an outcome different from what had been strongly anticipated since 2018 (and indicated since 2011): That the Taliban could no longer be defeated militarily (nor should it be). Some countries, such as Norway and

Germany, pursued a policy of peace diplomacy in Afghanistan, but NATO was not included in the American negotiations with the Taliban. Consequently, NATO (and the US allies) found themselves without any influence over the decision to exit nor the conditions of that exit.

Both the Americans and the Taliban sent ambiguous signals during the negotiation process: The Americans regarding the timing and conditions for an exit, and the Taliban concerning their commitments to engage in dialogue with the Ghani government. There is considerable evidence suggesting that the Ghani government did not believe that the Americans would leave Afghanistan. This was likely due to Bonn II, where the NATO countries had committed to a decade-long engagement after 2014, or to passages in the Doha Agreement stipulating Taliban participation in a national reconciliation process to fulfil the agreement, or possibly due to strong expectations regarding a strategic shift in US policy after President Biden took over from Trump.

President Ghani appeared unprepared for the aftermath of the withdrawal – the Taliban taking over – despite the signs since 2011 that international involvement was fading and that the US had abandoned the objective of defeating and excluding the Taliban. While the Doha negotiations were ongoing, in reality, no one knew what the Taliban's plans really were. For the Americans and Taliban alike, the internal Afghan peace process was of lesser importance than the American withdrawal.

This chapter has, firstly, highlighted three factors significant to the Taliban taking over in Afghanistan. First, there was insufficient investment in a political solution or Afghan peace agreement. The exclusion of amnesty and inclusion in the initial phases of the conflict, along with a lack of investment in a formal and inclusive negotiation track that could involve both Taliban representatives and the Afghan government, remained absent. Instead, various other peace tracks emerged, which ultimately served to strengthen the Taliban: One led by the Americans (particularly under Trump) focused primarily on the withdrawal of US troops; one led by the Afghan central government concentrating on disarmament and the reintegration of lower-ranking Taliban members; and, finally, one that regional countries competed over to create a counterbalance to the exclusive American negotiations.

Secondly, the chapter indicates that the Taliban capitalised on the American interest in an exit and succeeded in keeping the Afghan government excluded from the negotiations regarding the withdrawal, culminating in the Doha Agreement of 2020. President Ghani and the regional actors were all surprised when the Americans opted to carry out a 'timeline-based' withdrawal rather than one contingent upon certain conditions being met; most importantly, an Afghan peace agreement that could potentially have led to a different post-withdrawal government.

Thirdly, the chapter describes how overtures had been made to the Taliban since 2011 – not only by the Americans but also by regional neighbouring countries. This enabled the Taliban to expand its room for manoeuvre. This was facilitated by the widening gap between the Americans and the regional actors, and because issues ranging from CT on domestic soil, separatism, drug trafficking and large-scale infrastructure projects became prominent on the regional agenda. Pakistan, Iran, Russia and China in particular adjusted their positions regarding the Taliban despite initially having supported the War on Terror. As the war progressed, the

Taliban emerged as an unavoidable actor in the future of Afghanistan, prompting regional actors to compete for the role of mediator. At the same time, the new IS threat became a greater concern for the regional neighbours (as well as for the US) than the Taliban's advance.

Obviously, it is difficult to speculate on what might have occurred had the international community acted differently, such as by involving the Taliban in the transitional government established under Karzai as a result of the Bonn Agreement. Nevertheless, this analysis suggests that there was insufficient focus on the central importance of facilitating an intra-Afghan dialogue process.

Notes

- 1 It is noteworthy that the Doha Agreement is often associated with the Taliban's commitment to sever ties with international terrorism (primarily al-Qaeda) in exchange for the withdrawal of US forces. The condition that the Taliban should engage in a national reconciliation process has never received the same level of attention.
- 2 However, there were a few individual countries that were particularly involved in getting the intra-Afghan dialogue back on track, including Germany and Norway. For the German approach, see [Die Bundesregierung \(2019\)](#), *Input Paper on German Support for the Peace Process in Afghanistan*; [Bjørn Tore Godal et al. \(2016\)](#), 'En god alliert: Norge i Afghanistan 2001–2014', pp. 145–149.
- 3 *National Guard*, 'Obama announces troop reductions, way forward in Afghanistan', 23 June 2011.
- 4 SIGAR, *Why the Afghan government collapsed*, November 2022, p. 11.
- 5 Thomas [Ruttig \(2021\)](#), "'Another Bonn-style conference': A new plan to 'fix' the war and enable US troops to leave", Afghanistan Analysts Network, 7 March 2021.
- 6 Track II negotiations refer to informal, unofficial dialogue between Afghan representatives (and sometimes regional or international actors) that took place alongside formal peace talks and official diplomacy. These negotiations were meant to foster understanding, build trust and explore potential solutions to the ongoing conflict, typically proceeding outside of the official peace processes.
- 7 UN Security Council (2001), 'Agreement on provisional arrangements in Afghanistan pending the re-establishment of permanent government institutions ("Bonn Agreement")'.
- 8 Godal et al., 'En god alliert'; SIGAR, *Afghan government collapsed*.
- 9 SIGAR, *Afghan government collapsed*; SIGAR (2016), *Corruption in conflict: Lessons from the U.S. experience in Afghanistan*, September 2016.
- 10 Afghanistan has been subject to various types of regimes, including a one-party republic under President Daud (1973–78), which overthrew the monarchy; three communist regimes (1978–92); and a brief post-communist regime (led by the mujahideen), which resulted in fragmentation and civil war (1992–96). This was followed by the first period of Taliban rule, characterised by an Islamist regime (1996–2001). Thomas [Ruttig \(2018\)](#), 'Outside, inside: Afghanistan's paradoxical political party system (2001–16)', Afghanistan Analysts Network and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 6 May 2018.
- 11 Tone [Tingsgård \(2017\)](#), 'Sverige i Afghanistan 2002–2014', SOU, p. 46.
- 12 Tingsgård, 'Sverige i Afghanistan', p. 45.
- 13 Ruttig, 'Outside, inside'.
- 14 SIGAR, *Afghan government collapsed*.
- 15 The Afghan state was characterised by weak state institutions. The people–state divide was marked by pervasive corruption, so-called 'warlordism' and the inability of the state to provide an effective legal system. The Taliban exploited this schism to garner

- support and present themselves as a legitimate alternative to the government in Kabul. See Nisha Biswal et al., 'Afghanistan study group: Final report', USIP, 3 February 2021, p. 16. See also Tingsgård, 'Sverige i Afghanistan', p. 19.
- 16 Haqmal Daudzai (2021), *The State-Building Dilemma in Afghanistan*, Budrich Academic Press GmbH, chapter 6.
 - 17 Thomas Ruttig (2021), 'Have the Taliban changed?', *CTC SENTINEL*, pp. 1–15.
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- 38 Sheikh and Greenwood, *Taliban talks*.
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- 64 NATO, 'Chicago Summit Declaration', 20 May 2012.
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- Pashtunistan) or who deny the legitimacy of the border. Pakistan is often highlighted as the country that provided the most support to the Taliban. The integration of Sirajuddin Haqqani with the Taliban in 2016 has been described in the academic literature as a reflection of the power wielded by Pakistani military intelligence agency, the ISI. See Matt Waldman, 'The sun in the sky: The relationship between Pakistan's ISI and Afghan Insurgents', Crisis States Research Centre, June 2010.
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 - 89 Pakistan's actions in Afghanistan are typically interpreted through the lens of historical alliance patterns, as India supported the Northern Alliance while Pakistan backed the Taliban regime during the Afghan civil war in the 1990s. Indian policy towards Afghanistan can be viewed as an extension of its policy towards Pakistan. The country's support for the Northern Alliance in the late 1990s stemmed from a need to counter pro-Pakistani forces, particularly the Taliban. This support continued after the US-led invasion in 2001, when leaders of the Northern Alliance became part of the new government. After 2001, India contributed to reconstruction efforts, particularly through investments in infrastructure and energy supply, but increasingly assumed a role focused on diplomatic initiatives aimed at fostering regional dialogue regarding the challenges in Afghanistan. Consequently, India did not deploy troops in Afghanistan. India's total investments in Afghanistan are estimated to be around \$3 billion and have impacted all 34 provinces of the country. See Congressional Research Service (2021), *U.S. Military Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan*, p. 54.
 - 90 Mona K. Sheikh, 'Haqqani-netværket: Fra ven til fjende', *Ræson*, 13 November 2011.
 - 91 Godal et al., 'En god alliert', p. 142.
 - 92 Ekaterina Stepanova (2020), 'Russia and the search for a negotiated solution in Afghanistan', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 73(5), 928–52.
 - 93 *The Guardian*, 'Taliban and Afghan groups find common ground in landmark talks', 6 February 2019.
 - 94 *The Guardian*, 'State of the Union: Donald Trump attacks Mueller and Democrats in divisive speech', 6 February 2019.
 - 95 *New York Times*, 'Taliban peace talks in Moscow end with hope the U.S. exits, if not too quickly', 6 February 2019.
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 - 97 Stepanova, 'Russia and the search'; T. E. Eder (2014), *China–Russia Relations in Central Asia: Energy Policy, Beijing's New Assertiveness and 21st Century Geopolitics*, Springer VS.
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- 100 Umarov, 'Russia's role', pp. 136–148.
- 101 Nurlan Aliyev, 'How Russia views Afghanistan today', *War on the Rocks*, 19 October 2020.
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- 103 Kayhan Barzegar (2007), *Iran and the West: A foe or a potential ally against terror?*, RUSI, 16 November. See also Interview, Ryan Crocker interview (10 September 2010), 'Ryan Crocker oral history'; Mohsen Milani (2010), *Iran and Afghanistan*, USIP.
- 104 Kashif M. Ghumman (2002), 'Iran–US relations in the Post–9/11 days: Problems and prospects', *Strategic Studies* 22(3), 170–86; Daniel Heradstveit and G. Matthew Bonham (2007), 'What the axis of evil metaphor did to Iran', *Middle East Journal* 61(3), 421–40.
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- 110 Nader and Laha, 'Iran's balancing act', p. 8.
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- 112 BBC, 'Iran attacks: "IS" hits parliament and Khomeini mausoleum', 7 June 2017.
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- 115 Kasturi Chatterjee, 'The SCO in Afghanistan', *Gateway House*, 20 April 2022.
- 116 Lars Erslev Andersen and Yang Jiang, *China's engagement in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Xinjiang*, DIIS, June 2018.
- 117 Amin Mohseni-Cheraghloo (2022), 'China and Afghanistan: A new partnership of old neighbours in South Asia', in Amina Khan (ed.), *Perspectives on the Evolving Situation in Afghanistan*, Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.
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- 119 The expansion was to take place partly via sea routes through the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean and through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean. See Andersen and Jiang, 'China's engagement'.
- 120 James Steinberg and Michael O'Hanlon (2014), 'Keep hope alive: How to prevent U.S.–Chinese relations from blowing up', *Foreign Affairs* 93(4), 107–17.

4 The US War in Afghanistan

Introduction

There is general consensus among researchers, commentators and politicians that the War in Afghanistan was a failure, as it ultimately resulted in the Taliban regaining power in the country. However, there is no agreement on the reasons why two decades of military efforts did not yield success. Already during the American-led withdrawal and in the months that followed, certain narratives dominated public discourse, all suggesting that the background for this failure lay in Afghan culture, the ineptitude of the Kabul government or Pakistan's duplicity, while less attention was given to the role of the US and its coalition partners.

This chapter instead focuses on the role of the US in the planning and conduct of the war. The reason for placing special emphasis on the United States is that it was primarily the US who planned when and how the war would begin, as well as when it would end. Although the US quickly garnered support from a broad international coalition, including NATO and political backing within the UN system, it remained the most significant external actor throughout, dictating the shifting overarching strategies right up to the unilateral decision to withdraw.

President George W. Bush found himself under immense pressure following the events of 11 September 2001, as expectations in the United States and around the world called for a swift, decisive and forceful response to the terrorism witnessed in Washington and New York. In contrast to the US response to the terrorist attack on the USS *Cole* in Aden in 2000, where the FBI, a *domestic American* law enforcement agency, led the investigation, Bush determined that the response would take the form of a military operation led by the Pentagon in collaboration with the CIA.

This chapter highlights three pivotal US decisions made during the planning of the intervention, which had a decisive impact on the overall course – and outcome – of the war. While strategies were adjusted along the way, these three initial decisions proved crucial:

- The decision to pursue regime change and to combat the Taliban, which thereby became the principal adversary in the war against al-Qaeda.

- The decision not to deploy a large invasion force as part of the regime change strategy, opting instead to prioritise collaboration with and support for the Northern Alliance in the initial phase of the war.
- The decision to transfer state-building responsibilities to a multilateral effort resulted in a lack of accountability, preventing the new Afghan government from ever becoming a constructive partner for the United States and its coalition.

These decisions are relevant, because it became apparent that a popular and nationally rooted insurgent movement such as the Taliban (regardless of how unpopular it may have been at the onset of the war) could not be defeated militarily. Furthermore, the chapter illustrates that these decisions were made against a backdrop of significant knowledge deficits among decision-makers, including questions regarding al-Qaeda's capabilities and organisation, the relationship between the leadership and the Taliban, and the power dynamics among the Pashtun tribes in the south and Kandahar, where the Taliban had its power base.

In the wake of the shock of 9/11, the American government was under immense pressure to provide a swift and effective response to terrorism. The context was marked by fear and dominated by commentators and media who amplified the threat posed by al-Qaeda. Additionally, prior to 9/11, the US had downplayed the threat of global terrorism (in favour of concerns regarding China and the Taiwan issue) and was therefore unprepared to deal with a terrorist attack of the magnitude witnessed in New York and Washington. Nearly 3,000 lives were lost, and approximately twice as many were injured.

When identifying the three decisive decisions that had implications for the outcome of the war, the decision-making process must be understood in the context of this challenging situation in the weeks and months following 9/11. In other words, it is an attempt to highlight some critical reasons for why the war was lost and the Taliban's resurgence. Alternative decisions are presented in this analysis, because alternatives were indeed rejected in the planning phase and the initial months of the war. It is important to emphasise that this analysis is not an attempt to make counterfactual assertions that the rejected decisions would have led to a different outcome. We cannot know that, and speculation on that matter is unwarranted here. However, it is essential in an inquiry tasked with delivering lessons learned to point out that alternatives to the decisions made did exist.

The chapter begins by describing the context in which the American decision was made together with the considerations shaping the planning and initiation of the war. The highly charged situation after 9/11 coincided with US military engagement in other regions (e.g., the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia) as part of the War on Terror. The chapter then outlines the course of the war and the developments along the way, including shifts between counterterrorism (CT) and counterinsurgency (COIN), adjustments in the approach to the Taliban, and the

varying strategies of successive American administrations. The third part of the chapter analyses the consequences of the three decisive decisions, as they had a significant impact on the outcome of the war.

Sources and archival material

Certain books receive particular attention in this chapter, as they provide significant insight into American government sources. These include Bob Woodward's *Bush at War*. A journalism legend who worked for more than 50 years at the *Washington Post*, Woodward had access to a substantial number of documents from the National Security Council (NSC) from the period during which the war was planned, as well as interviews with all decision-makers, including the president and his closest advisers, and he serves as an important source. Another central work is Craig Whitlock's *The Afghanistan Papers*. A *Washington Post* correspondent, Whitlock had extensive material declassified. This material includes interviews with American military personnel and diplomats in Afghanistan conducted by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), as well as other documents, including US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's so-called 'snowflakes' (memos). The chapter also draws upon declassified government documents available from The National Security Archives, which is operated by George Washington University, and materials from The Miller Center at the University of Virginia as part of their Oral History programme, where interviews regarding Afghanistan with decision-makers from the George W. Bush administration have been published. The chapter on Afghanistan in the book *Hand-Off: The Foreign Policy George W. Bush Passed to Barack Obama* (2023) contains important declassified sources and analyses. This book is published by Stephen J. Hadley, who was senior adviser to Condoleezza Rice when the events of 9/11 occurred. Robert L. Grenier, the CIA chief in Islamabad before and during the initial phases of the war, provides unique insights into the mobilisation of southern Pashtun militias in his 2015 book, *88 Days to Kandahar: A CIA Diary*. Although the examination of international relations was not originally planned to be based on archival studies, archives were nonetheless incorporated to a limited extent: This pertains to the aforementioned online archives as well as the National Archives, supplemented by a review of 40 boxes of material from the NSC and the Global War on Terror archive at the George W. Bush Presidential Center in Dallas, Texas. It should be noted that this is by no means an exhaustive systematic study of the archives but rather a cross-checking of sources and substantiation of points made in the existing literature.

Background: 9/11 and the fear of terror

Planning of the war in Afghanistan in 2001 was rife with challenges. Lacking any coastline, Afghanistan is surrounded on all sides by vast land masses, and it borders states with which the US was not allied. During the initial phase, Pakistan, under President Musharraf, proved cooperative; the Pakistani president even replaced the leadership of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to enhance loyalty towards the collaboration.¹ In the previous years, the US had faced significant difficulties in working with Pakistan to combat al-Qaeda, and it quickly became clear that challenges stemming from Pakistani double-dealing (cooperating with the US while simultaneously supporting the Taliban) persisted despite assurances of full loyalty to the American War on Terror. Russia and Tajikistan were also willing to cooperate, but American troop deployment required a base in Uzbekistan, which imposed significant demands on the Americans but ultimately allowed for the establishment of the base.²

Afghanistan is a large country, squeezed between substantial land masses such as Iran, Pakistan and China, as well as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. With an area of 652,225 square kilometres, it is roughly the size of France. Moreover, Afghanistan is mountainous but also contains valleys and desert areas, with a climate that is harsh in many regions, particularly during winter. This posed a challenge for the Americans, as the war commenced on 7 October, leaving little time to achieve significant military objectives before winter set in. Besides George W. Bush, the war cabinet included Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, CIA Director George J. Tenet, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Richard B. Myers, and White House Chief of Staff Andrew H. Card Jr. The division of roles was clear: Bush was the leader to whom all aligned, Rice served as coordinator and close adviser to the president, and Powell was tasked with securing agreements with other states for military overflights, which proved easy, and bases for troop deployment, which would prove much more difficult. Rumsfeld was responsible for identifying military targets and ensuring that American special forces could enter and operate in the country, while Tenet dispatched the CIA to pay warlords in the Northern Alliance to align with the US and support the Pentagon's special forces, which ultimately entered through Uzbekistan. However, the responsibility for formulating a war plan lay with the Pentagon and Rumsfeld.³

From 9/11 onwards, virtually everything was focused on terrorism, al-Qaeda and the War on Terror. This emphasis extended to the media, which dedicated most of its coverage to these topics. Numerous stories needed to be written, and competition ensued to produce the most interesting and sensational accounts, often based on limited knowledge and extensive speculation. Yet, even if there was merely a grain of truth in these narratives, the political system in the US (and other countries) was compelled to prepare for various threat scenarios – partly to mitigate the risk of public panic, which became starkly evident during an anthrax attack shortly after 9/11. When anthrax bacteria, which had been aerosolised in an

advanced process for developing an effective biological weapon, were discovered in the American postal system and actually killed five individuals, panic ensued, accompanied by increasing suspicions that al-Qaeda was behind the biological terrorism. This concern was echoed in Denmark, where authorities responded to suspicious powder alarms over 100 times in a short period.⁴ The panic was only exacerbated when professors in medical microbiology alarmed the public by appearing in lab coats in ‘breaking news’, warning that any fool could isolate anthrax in their basement, until it was clarified that only three countries in the world – the US, Iraq and Russia – had the capacity to produce weapons-grade anthrax. This example illustrates the widespread fears following 9/11, with anxiety and panic intensifying because very few people possessed concrete knowledge about al-Qaeda and terrorism, including WMD terrorism (terrorism involving weapons of mass destruction). Nevertheless, with support from the media, several experts greatly inflated the threat posed by al-Qaeda.⁵

The Americans were already engaged in developing preparedness against WMD terrorism, an area of significant focus for President Bill Clinton. Following a 1995 attack in the Tokyo subway by a Japanese cult using gas and the bombing of a government building in Oklahoma that same year by right-wing extremists, Clinton placed considerable emphasis on WMD terrorism: Congressional hearings were conducted in 1995, and the following year, comprehensive legislation was passed.⁶ This heightened focus led to thousands of alarms concerning suspicious powders in the US, all of which proved false.⁷ There were a few isolated instances where extremists experimented with biological agents, but al-Qaeda never came close to acquiring or managing WMDs. The anthrax attacks in the American postal system were eventually traced back to a US biological weapons research laboratory employee with an alcohol problem.⁸

At the same time, there were constant fears and concerns that a new large-scale terrorist attack could strike the world’s only superpower. Given the severely limited concrete knowledge about al-Qaeda’s capacity and organisation, including whether al-Qaeda was in alliance with hostile states, there was an indisputable expectation among all parties – politicians, authorities, the media, the public and internationally among friends and foes alike – that the United States would respond massively and militarily to the 9/11 terrorism. This was the context in which the planning for a war in Afghanistan took place.

Knowledge base: Iraq, Afghanistan, al-Qaeda and the Taliban

While expectations regarding a swift, resolute and massive military response from the United States was clear from all sides, it remained uncertain *how* that American response would materialise, how it should be organised, and precisely where it should be directed. It did not take long for authorities to identify Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda network as responsible for 9/11, and since the network’s leaders were located in Afghanistan, all indications pointed to the impoverished, Taliban-controlled country in South Asia as the primary target for the American response.

On the same day that the terrorist act occurred, however, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld pointed to Iraq as a target for a potential US attack, and that same night, his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, requested his staff to provide intelligence on possible Iraqi involvement in the terror attack.⁹ According to Bob Woodward, there was initially serious discussion about whether the US should direct its response towards both Iraq and Afghanistan, until President George W. Bush intervened, stating that the cabinet should focus on Afghanistan and that an attack on Iraq could be addressed at a later date. Nevertheless, Iraq was on the drawing board immediately following 9/11.¹⁰ In the weeks that followed, the US enjoyed widespread sympathy and support from around the world, but the expectation was primarily for an operation in Afghanistan, while an attack on Iraq, as Colin Powell pointed out, would likely be met with confusion and could hurt support. Bush and his security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, accepted this argument.¹¹

As noted in the American analysis of why the war in Afghanistan went awry and the Taliban regained power, the researchers behind *The Afghanistan Assumptions Project* explicitly define Afghanistan as an abstraction. In this respect, they, along with security policy scholar and Director of the Council on Foreign Relations Richard Haass, who has extensive experience in the US administration, highlight how the individuals in the war cabinet not only had limited knowledge but also harboured numerous biases. The researchers use the phrase 'Afghanistan as abstraction' to suggest that the war in Afghanistan was more intended as an impactful signal to the world regarding the US War on Terror than as a genuine interest in the actual war within the country. The war was primarily seen as the first step in a broader campaign and was to be concluded swiftly to allow a transition to the global War on Terror, with Iraq at the forefront of the agenda.¹² Iraq had long been a topic of discussion in neoconservative circles in Washington since the Iraq War of 1991, where arguments were made to remove Saddam Hussein's regime. It was claimed that Iraq was producing WMDs, which could be disseminated to global terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda. Following the CIA's (exaggerated) assertion that al-Qaeda was organised in 60 countries and speculation that they could handle WMDs, the shock of 9/11 amplified fears of a WMD attack. In 2001, the CIA had neither evidence of Iraqi involvement in 9/11 nor that Iraq was actively producing and distributing WMD to global terrorists – the constructed CIA evidence linking Iraq, WMDs and al-Qaeda, which formed the basis for Colin Powell's presentation to the UN Security Council in February 2003, was first developed during 2002.¹³ However, the debate in Washington was heavily influenced by the belief that Saddam Hussein's Iraq was producing WMDs and had connections to al-Qaeda, a conviction held by the Pentagon leadership. Declassified documents from the National Archives attest to how both Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld argued that Iraq should be attacked in the first phase of the War on Terror.¹⁴ George W. Bush is known for having rejected the idea of attacking Iraq simultaneously with Afghanistan, but Iraq remained a target for a subsequent Phase 2. This phase was rapidly approaching, and as early as 21 November 2001, Rumsfeld contacted General Tommy Franks, who was occupied with leading the US bombings of al-Qaeda strongholds in Tora Bora, instructing him to

prepare operational plans for an invasion of Iraq within a week. This early planning for Phase 2 of the War on Terror (and the subsequent war initiated in March 2003) became a distraction from the war in Afghanistan.¹⁵

The ambiguity regarding what the response to 9/11 should precisely entail and, consequently, what the objective of the war in Afghanistan was, as well as the distraction caused by other objectives (e.g., the Iraq War, an intervention in Mindanao in the Philippines, and operations in the Horn of Africa), contributed from the outset to undermining the American war effort in Afghanistan. This also allowed the Taliban greater latitude to regain strength.

Furthermore, American knowledge about Afghanistan primarily stemmed from the CIA's engagement with Islamic insurgent groups in the 1980s, and in the years leading up to 9/11, from intelligence regarding the presence of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda in the country since 1996.¹⁶ The vast border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan, also known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, had become populated by Soviet–Afghan War veterans. Among the Arab fighters, al-Qaeda was established in 1988 and came under the leadership of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri.¹⁷ After contributing to the liberation of Afghanistan from the communist USSR, the fighters who joined al-Qaeda from 1988 onwards focused on liberating major countries in the Arab Middle East, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, from the Western-supported regimes. They were involved in terrorism in both states. Veterans from the Afghan insurgency and al-Qaeda became involved in conflicts in Algeria, Yemen, the Philippines and Bosnia. Additionally, they supported the struggle for a free Palestine against Israel. They viewed the US as the major power backing the regimes they deemed illegitimate, thus designating the Americans as the primary enemy that had to be expelled from the Middle East. They were particularly discontented with the expansion of American bases in the region. As early as 1993, a group associated with al-Qaeda attempted to topple the World Trade Center towers in a terrorist attack. At that time, investigations pointed towards the al-Qaeda networks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, the Philippines and Egypt.¹⁸

The United States became increasingly convinced that Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda posed a serious threat. Bin Laden lost his Saudi citizenship in 1994 and continued his activities in Sudan until 1996, when, following American pressure on Sudan to expel him, he chose to relocate to Afghanistan. There, he established training camps and expanded his network. The Taliban reluctantly permitted this on the condition that al-Qaeda would not interfere in Afghan affairs or initiate its own war against the United States.¹⁹

Due to the threats Osama bin Laden had issued against the United States since 1996, the connections to the attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, and the organisation of terrorism in East Africa, the CIA had gathered information on al-Qaeda and attempted to map the network's organisation, capacity and reach. In his memoirs, George Tenet confidently asserts that the CIA was both well-prepared for war against al-Qaeda and possessed considerable insight.²⁰ Nevertheless, there was a significant lack of knowledge, and some of the information the CIA possessed was directly incorrect; for instance, they believed it was likely that al-Qaeda possessed and could manage WMDs, including nuclear

weapons. This was not the case. Assessments of Osama bin Laden's relationships and wealth were also astonishingly inaccurate.²¹ In her memoirs, Condoleezza Rice writes:

The fact is that the United States was poorly prepared for September 11, 2001, for systematic and psychological reasons. Our homeland had been spared a major foreign attack since the British burned the White House in the War of 1814. Yes, there had been the devastating attack on a military base in Pearl Harbor and there had been fears of a homeland threat during World War II. But the homeland had not been hit. No one was prepared for what happened on that awful day.²²

In a so-called 'snowflake' from September 2003, Donald Rumsfeld wrote the following to Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence Steve Cambone: 'The lack of clarity as to who the enemies are, and what the problems are from an intelligence standpoint in Afghanistan and Iraq is serious'.²³ Declassified materials gathered by the National Security Archive, Craig Whitlock's *The Afghanistan Papers* and accounts from members of the war cabinet, documented and published by the Miller Center, all indicate how, two years into the war, Rumsfeld was not alone in lacking a precise understanding of the enemy; there was a widespread knowledge deficit within the American administration regarding both al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the connections between them, and more generally about the country of Afghanistan.

On the battlefield, there was a risk of so-called collateral damage, partly because it was difficult to distinguish between al-Qaeda, Taliban fighters and Afghan civilians, as none of them wore uniforms. The issue of the knowledge deficit, as Rumsfeld complained, was that there was no precise intelligence regarding al-Qaeda and the Taliban that decision-makers could rely on or access. Here, it is important to clarify that the CIA, through its base in Islamabad, had indeed developed a comprehensive understanding of the Taliban since the late 1990s. However, it faced challenges due to uncertainties regarding the Taliban's internal power dynamics and its relationship with al-Qaeda, as well as about al-Qaeda's capabilities, where knowledge of the organisation's potential access to WMDs, including nuclear weapons, was pure speculation. Such speculation was further fuelled when interrogations of the Pakistani reactor physicist Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood (Dr. Bashir) in November 2001 revealed that, in addition to contacts with North Korea, Iraq, Iran and other states, he had indeed met with Osama bin Laden. This led to Dick Cheney's so-called 'one percent doctrine', which Robert L. Grenier cites in his *CIA Diary*:

If there is a 1 percent chance it could be true [that al-Qaida had access to WMDs], he [Cheney] said, we have to pursue it as though it were true. Given the stakes involved, that was hard to argue with – particularly at a time when the crushing fear of another, infinitely more devastating attack on the homeland hung like an incubus over every moment, waking or sleeping.²⁴

Furthermore, despite warnings, the Pentagon had not prepared to combat non-state actors. As Joseph J. Collins writes in *Lessons Encountered*:

The attacks on 9/11 were in part an intelligence and a homeland security failure, *but they were also a failure of the national security bureaucracy to adapt to a new and growing threat* [our emphasis]. For its part, prior to 9/11, the U.S. Armed Forces were primarily focused on high-tech, conventional warfare. Their long-range vision papers, Joint Vision 2010 (1996) and Joint Vision 2020 (2000), barely mentioned counterterrorism or counterinsurgency as major defense requirements. Combating al Qaeda was not a major focus of the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review, which was in the final draft stage in the days prior to the attack. On September 11, 2001, America's national security leadership was simply on the wrong page.²⁵

Al-Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden, was obviously known, but knowledge of his connections – including those with the Taliban, leaders and opposition groups in the Arab Middle East – as well as al-Qaeda's actual capacity, scope, reach and control over weapons and military technology, was limited. This was due to the fact that prior to 9/11, this information resided in various parts of the US administration, which lacked the necessary exchange of knowledge and information.²⁶ The understanding of al-Qaeda's and Osama bin Laden's political objectives in the 'war against the Jews and crusaders' – the term used by the al-Qaeda leader to describe jihad against the United States, the West and Israel – was modest; in general, knowledge of al-Qaeda's ideology was poor. This jihad was not motivated by 'hatred of Western values', as often portrayed by political leaders in the West, but by political goals directed against what Osama bin Laden defined as illegitimate Arab regimes, particularly in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, 'Western imperialist exploitation' of the Middle East, and Israel's occupation of Palestine.²⁷ According to al-Qaeda, this situation could only persist because the major Arab states had allied themselves with the US in a betrayal of Islam, which, in turn, massively supported Israel and propped up Saudi Arabia and Egypt. According to the al-Qaeda leader, US support was solely motivated by the safeguarding of its own imperialist and economic interests. Criticism of the US and the Arab regimes resonated widely and garnered support among the people in the Middle East and South Asia. Al-Qaeda's objective was regime change in Cairo and Riyadh ('the near enemy'), but this could only be realised if the US ('the far enemy') was forced out of the Middle East and, more generally, from territories with Muslim populations in Asia.²⁸ Osama bin Laden believed that a major attack on the US would either compel the US to withdraw (as they had previously done in Lebanon and Somalia) or lead them to lose a war of attrition in Afghanistan.²⁹ Obviously, the Taliban had no interest in a US invasion, which demonstrated how al-Qaeda and the Taliban had very different political objectives. Al-Qaeda, the Taliban and other Islamist groups rejected democracy and liberalism, interpreting liberal democracy as a means of Western imperialism to exploit the region and as

a religious assault on Islam. In foreign policy matters, however, the Taliban were nationalist, while al-Qaeda pursued a global agenda that was entirely different from that of the Taliban.

CIA Director George Tenet had consistently warned about Osama bin Laden since the attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, which resulted in approximately 300 deaths. Consequently, President Bill Clinton allocated significant resources to the CIA to gather information on bin Laden and to conduct counter-terrorism (CT) operations against al-Qaeda, although he did not authorise the CIA to kill bin Laden if the agency located him. There were several occasions when drones – an entirely new technology at the time – had captured footage of the al-Qaeda leader, but they were still unarmed.³⁰ When George W. Bush succeeded Clinton, he downplayed CT efforts but responded decisively after 9/11 with the War on Terror. The CIA focused on al-Qaeda and recognised that the group posed a serious threat to the US, as evidenced by the embassy attacks in East Africa in 1998 and the attack on the USS *Cole* in Aden in 2000, the investigation of which was still ongoing when 9/11 occurred.³¹ It is well known that the CIA had warned as early as 6 August 2001 that al-Qaeda was planning an attack, and it later emerged that warnings had begun several months earlier without prompting a response from the George W. Bush administration.³² Thus, while the CIA had knowledge that al-Qaeda was working on an attack, it lacked precise intelligence data, illustrating the nature of the information that the CIA and the American intelligence community possessed: It was imprecise, based on speculation and the piecing together of fragments of knowledge, which led to a distorted image of al-Qaeda. It would take several years before accurate information about al-Qaeda became available.³³ As mentioned, the most substantial and comprehensive knowledge of al-Qaeda and the Taliban within the American administration was concentrated in the CIA office in Islamabad. However, it was the CIA's Counterterrorism Center (CTC), under the leadership of Cofer Black, that, according to Robert L. Grenier's account, had the most significant influence both in the planning and in the early phases of the war. Grenier characterises the CTC's empirical knowledge of Afghanistan, the Taliban and al-Qaeda as highly inadequate.³⁴

It was not until investigative journalist Steve Coll from *The New Yorker*, former executive editor of *The Washington Post*, and author of Pulitzer Prize-winning books on the American engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, meticulously uncovered the financial dealings of the bin Laden family that insights into their finances emerged, revealing that the rumours regarding Osama bin Laden's wealth were grossly exaggerated.³⁵ Studies on early al-Qaeda also demonstrated how the relationship with the Taliban was far from conflict-free and that the Taliban did not share al-Qaeda's regional and global agenda. However, this knowledge was first documented, among others by Norwegian researchers, several years after the war in Afghanistan had commenced.³⁶ This information would undoubtedly have been useful when George W. Bush's war cabinet discussed and decided to designate the Taliban as the primary enemy in the War on Terror in Afghanistan.

The course of the war

In the entire lead-up to the start of the war on 7 October, there was considerable anxiety regarding its outcome; media and commentators were impatient, and once the war started so too did the criticism, asserting that the strategy was merely a continuation of the Clinton strategy (which involved military strikes but would not successfully harm al-Qaeda). After a few weeks of war, prominent conservative commentators warned that the war would result in a new Vietnam; or, as it was termed, a 'quagmire'.³⁷ However, the crucial northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif fell first, and by the end of November, the Northern Alliance was outside Kabul, the Americans unable to prevent them from storming into the capital as the Taliban fled. The Americans reassured themselves that Pashtun tribal leaders were also advancing. Nevertheless, the Northern Alliance, led by Mohammad Qasim Fahim Khan (who had succeeded slain leader Ahmed Shah Massoud) seized control of large parts of Kabul, appropriating property and land, ultimately resulting in Fahim Khan becoming the Minister of Defence in the new government.³⁸ The Americans had expressed concerns about him in the lead-up to and initial stages of the war, noting his peculiar passivity and his absence for a period; however, there is substantial evidence suggesting that he used this time to plan meticulously how he could use the capture of Kabul to his advantage. Officially, the Americans lauded him with an *honour cordon* at the Pentagon; unofficially, however, they described him as a corrupt, destabilising warlord.³⁹ Fahim Khan was by no means the only individual upon whom the Americans relied while being entirely cognisant that they were criminal and corrupt figures. This applied to several individuals who became part of the government, as well as those who took leadership roles in the provinces. As the war progressed, the challenges grew increasingly significant and became more difficult to address, as the measures taken often had the opposite effect of the good intentions, exacerbating the problems instead. This is thoroughly documented in the aforementioned *The Afghanistan Papers*.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the impression in Washington was that things were going well: With the Taliban's flight from Kabul before winter, the regime change was deemed successful. With the Pashtun Hamid Karzai at the helm, the US war cabinet believed it had identified a qualified individual to lead Afghanistan while simultaneously representing the largest ethnic group in the country. Karzai, with support from the CIA in Islamabad, had arrived in Kandahar and southern Afghanistan, where he had led an anti-Taliban militia before being evacuated by American forces. Besides being Pashto, Karzai had received a good education in India, spoke several languages, and therefore appeared to be the right person to lead a transitional government.⁴¹

In accordance with the planning for the war, the US sought to internationalise the transition to a new Afghanistan, and Colin Powell collaborated with the UN to organise the process. Germany offered to host a *loya jirga* (a great council) in Bonn in early December. There had been another candidate in contention for the position of Afghanistan's leader (Abdul Satar Sirat, an Islamic scholar and former Minister of Justice), but despite his broader support within the Afghan delegation,

an agreement was reached nine days later, under American pressure, to appoint Karzai, who arrived at the presidential palace in Kabul on 22 December.⁴² The Bush administration's strategy was now multilateral, with a significant division of responsibilities. Japan invited participants to a donor conference in Tokyo in January 2002, where commitments of substantial funds for the reconstruction of Afghanistan were made, alongside the allocation of responsibilities among states: The US would be responsible for building and training the Afghan army; Germany would train a national police force; the UK would tackle the extensive opium production; Italy would develop the legal system; and Japan would lead an initiative for the disarmament and demobilisation of warlords and their militias.⁴³ These responsibilities reflected a clear identification of the key issues to address if the process towards a stable Afghanistan with a legitimate government was to succeed: Security and the establishment of a state monopoly on violence, combating corruption and the dismantling of opium production, power-sharing, rule of law, and the establishment of a legitimate and representative government. However, success obviously required the effective implementation of these responsibilities, particularly the disarmament of private armies and militias, which ultimately never occurred.⁴⁴ With the Taliban's surprisingly swift collapse, the Americans viewed the war as almost over and that the reconstruction of the new Afghanistan could commence; however, the war had, in fact, only just begun. This would become evident when the Taliban reorganised themselves after a brief period, operating with full force from 2006 onwards.

A new *loya jirga* took place in June 2002 in Kabul, confirming a transitional government under Karzai's leadership. A new constitution, primarily drafted by the Northern Alliance, was adopted during a third *loya jirga* in January 2004, after which Afghanistan was prepared for a presidential election followed by parliamentary elections. Karzai was elected in October 2004, and parliamentary elections were successfully held in September: Voter turnout, including female voters, was significant, and many Afghans expressed satisfaction and hope for a better future, happy to be rid of the Taliban.

The removal of the Taliban from Kabul and government power had occurred surprisingly easily: The US had only 426 personnel (110 CIA agents and 316 special forces) on the ground when Kabul fell.⁴⁵ American boots might have been on the ground, but their number was minimal. Naturally, many more American soldiers were involved in the initial stages of the war, but they operated outside Afghanistan, either from bases in Central Asia, on warships or as pilots. Given the trajectory of the war in its early stages, however, the US remained optimistic despite the unresolved issues, which were acknowledged but pushed to the background. And so it was that National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice came to write in a response to Member of the House of Representatives Cynthia A. McKinney on 16 January 2002:

The people of Afghanistan suffered greatly under Taliban rule, and fortunately, that rule has come to an end. The United States is committed to supporting the new interim administration in Kabul and will work with other donors to bring stability to Afghanistan in the weeks and months ahead.⁴⁶

The expectation was that the Taliban had been defeated and that the reconstruction of Afghanistan, along with the transition to a democratic government, was imminent, with the country stabilising within a few months. This was a fallacy; instead, a potent insurgent group was being created in the years 2005–05, which grew in strength as the Kabul government lost legitimacy.

Upon capturing Kabul, the coalition had secured control of Bagram Airfield, and American forces began to deploy additional troops. NATO followed suit as the Bonn Conference established the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to assist Afghanistan in maintaining security. By January 2002, there were 8,000 American troops and 5,000 ISAF troops in Afghanistan, totalling 13,000, which was deemed sufficient to ensure the transition to a new democratic Afghanistan. Under Obama, the number of American troops eventually climbed to 140,000.⁴⁷

Stabilisation lacking, legitimacy disappearing

By this time, preparations for the Iraq War had already commenced, and attention in the media and among the US authorities quickly shifted towards Iraq over the course of 2002. As the focus moved away from Afghanistan and international cooperation faltered, the US began to lose legitimacy in the War on Terror, both regionally and internationally. The establishment of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp for so-called ‘enemy aliens’ and the practice of ‘secret renditions’ – the covert transport of detainees for interrogation under torture, in violation of both international law and the US Constitution – undermined support for the War on Terror among Middle Eastern and South Asian populations as well as internationally. Statements from the Bush administration indicating a willingness to act unilaterally, circumventing the international community and employing means (e.g., pre-emptive strikes) that could contravene international law further weakened support.⁴⁸ In September 2002, the Bush administration’s national security strategy asserted that the US reserved the right to wage war unilaterally and to conduct pre-emptive strikes outside the framework of the UN system. This bolstered opposition to the US. In Afghanistan, the Karzai government and a substantial portion of the Afghan population remained hopeful; however, as challenges evolved and the War on Terror unfolded, its legitimacy began to diminish rapidly from 2005, which in turn affected the US and its coalition partners. This deterioration was compounded by escalating problems in Afghanistan, the strengthening of the Taliban, and the Kabul government’s evident inability to address these challenges, presenting itself as dysfunctional and corrupt. Consequently, it was not the constructive partner that the Americans required in their efforts to stabilise Afghanistan.⁴⁹

In July 2010, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Der Spiegel* published reports detailing significant issues in the War in Afghanistan that stood in stark contrast to the much more positive official statements. The media outlets had made an agreement with WikiLeaks, which had obtained 91,000 documents from the US Department of Defense, the majority of which were classified. The three publications, which at that time had access to 75,000 documents, had reached an agreement with WikiLeaks to publish reports based on the leaked materials. It thus became

known that the Taliban received support from Pakistan and Iran; that the number of civilian casualties was significantly higher than previously acknowledged; and that there were other problems, such as companies operating in Afghanistan under contracts with the Pentagon being involved in prostitution, including child prostitution. These revelations raised substantial questions about the conduct of the war by the US and its coalition partners, contradicting official declarations that the situation was improving. It also came to light that the Taliban had significantly escalated its attacks and that al-Qaeda continued to carry out terrorist operations in Kabul. This undermined the legitimacy of the coalition's presence in Afghanistan.⁵⁰ The situation was exacerbated two years later when it was revealed that American soldiers had filmed themselves urinating on the bodies of deceased Taliban fighters, and that Qur'ans and other Islamic texts had been confiscated at Bagram Air Base, as soldiers believed they contained secret messages. Almost 500 Qur'ans, along with a large number of other texts, were attempted to be burned by soldiers, whose knowledge of Islam consisted of a one-hour PowerPoint presentation prior to their deployment.⁵¹ Both the reports based on the WikiLeaks documents and the Qur'an-burning incidents received extensive media coverage worldwide, which naturally contributed to casting the American forces in a negative light.⁵²

After the Taliban had evacuated Kandahar and other cities, the American leadership viewed the Taliban as having been largely defeated, with only pockets remaining that needed to be cleared. Moreover, the Americans aimed to prevent both Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders from escaping Afghanistan. In March 2002, intense fighting commenced under the name Operation Anaconda in Shah Wali Kot, a valley northeast of Kandahar, where jihadists and insurgents were hiding and attempting to move on to Pakistan. The border could not be secured, and Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden, along with many of their fighters, successfully fled to Pakistan. This allowed the Taliban to reorganise in the Pakistani border areas, from where they could return to Afghanistan and conduct attacks against the US, the coalition and Afghan security forces. This occurred with support from elements of the Pakistani intelligence service (ISI), despite Pakistan's official policy of collaborating with the US in the War on Terror. The American interpretation that the war, following the regime change, was effectively over, that the Taliban had been defeated, and that stabilisation and reconstruction were imminent was proven erroneous. It became evident that the US was instead facing a protracted insurgency, which had barely begun in 2002 but intensified dramatically from 2006 with increased Taliban attacks and al-Qaeda terrorism. The worsening security situation further damaged the declining legitimacy of the US, the coalition and the Kabul government.⁵³

The lack of legitimacy of the Kabul government was exacerbated by the fact that Afghanistan had never been a nation-state with a strong national centre; rather, it was a society of local groups whose loyalty was directed towards the local interests of their tribes and clans. Just as easily as the CIA was able to recruit moderate Taliban members to support them in the war against the Taliban, it was equally easy for these individuals to switch their allegiance back to the Taliban if they saw an advantage in doing so. The legitimacy challenges thus influenced the strategies and objectives of the US and the international community: Corruption grew

exponentially, the legitimacy of both the government and the US declined significantly, the loyalty of Afghans in rural areas outside Kabul wavered away from both the central and local governments, the opium industry expanded, warlords and their militias were neither demobilised nor disarmed, instead operating as states within a state, and there was generally little loyalty to the Kabul government within the Afghan army and police.⁵⁴

The Bush administration's interpretation that the Taliban had betrayed the Afghan people by allowing foreign forces such as al-Qaeda to operate in the country and train international terrorists meant that the elimination of the Taliban had to be understood as a liberation struggle, which excluded compromise and negotiations.⁵⁵ Consequently, the Americans categorically rejected the overtures made by the Taliban regarding the possibility of safe passage, a point Rumsfeld underscored during a Pentagon press conference in December 2001.⁵⁶

During the planning of the war, the cabinet was equally categorical in its decision that the US would unilaterally determine how the war would be fought in the initial phase: The US could not rely on other states, which was an impossible requirement.⁵⁷ In addition to Pakistan, the US was de facto dependent on Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, for not to mention support from the UN and NATO.

However, this issue first became truly apparent once the Taliban had been routed, Kabul had been captured, and a new transitional government had been installed under the leadership of Hamid Karzai. From that point – December 2001 and into January 2002 – the Bonn process internationalised the war. With the Taliban removed and on the run, a new government in place, a political process resulting in a new constitution, presidential and parliamentary elections, as well as international willingness to maintain a military presence through ISAF and to provide aid for reconstruction, the US viewed the developments as positive, as evidenced by the letter from Condoleezza Rice cited earlier.⁵⁸

A shift occurred in 2006: The Taliban's insurgency began in earnest, as described in the previous chapter, coinciding with significant resistance experienced in the Iraq War from Iraqi insurgents, particularly in the Sunni-dominated province of Anbar.

Counterinsurgency or counterterrorism?

In 2006, there was a significant focus on the situation in Iraq, which dominated the attention of the George W. Bush administration, the American Congress and the broader American media landscape. Nevertheless, the situation in Afghanistan had deteriorated so badly that Bush requested his administration to prepare a so-called review to analyse the situation and offer recommendations for a potential change in strategy. This review was top secret (it has since been declassified), but the administration had clearly decided to shift its strategy from *Counterterrorism* (CT) to *Counterinsurgency* (COIN).⁵⁹ In late 2006, Bush appointed General David H. Petraeus, who had spent years researching and lobbying for the development of a COIN strategy, to take command in Iraq and initiate COIN efforts in line with the Field Manual of which he had been a principal architect.⁶⁰ This was the

same strategy that the Bush administration now sought to implement in Afghanistan, which effectively meant a substantial increase (surge) in military operations against the Taliban. The number of American troops spiked from 20,000 to 40,000 between 2006 and 2008, alongside a much greater emphasis on development and nation-building initiatives across the entire country. Consequently, the number of *Provincial Reconstruction Teams* (PRTs) grew from 3 to 16, with military and civilian units deployed to the provinces, working alongside coalition security forces to oversee civil–military development.⁶¹ In contrast to CT, the COIN philosophy posits that rather than pursuing ‘terrorists’, local civilian structures should be strengthened, including local security forces tasked with combating ‘insurgent militias’. This shift also represented a change in how the Taliban were portrayed: From being equated with al-Qaeda (terrorists to be eliminated) to being viewed as part of a local insurgency against a challenged Afghan central government and foreign invasion forces.

David Kilcullen, an Australian officer who was brought to the US State Department as an adviser to Condoleezza Rice and subsequently lent to the Pentagon as an adviser to Petraeus in Iraq for the implementation of COIN, elaborates on the theory behind COIN in his 2009 book, *The Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. The concept of the ‘accidental guerilla’ originated during a patrol in Waziristan, where his Pakistani colleague expressed frustration over how difficult it was to distinguish between well-intentioned local tribesmen, insurgents and terrorists, noting that identification often depended on chance.⁶² The challenge lay in how the insurgents do not wear uniforms and dress like locals, while local individuals who initially did not sympathise with the insurgents might still choose to support them in their struggles against the coalition and the Afghan army. These locals generally prioritised support for local insurgents over foreign invading forces. Based on his observations as a combat officer and his research – he holds a PhD in anthropology – Kilcullen developed a model to explain this phenomenon using four concepts: Infection, Contagion, Intervention, and Rejection. Kilcullen’s explanation begins with al-Qaeda but is particularly effective in elucidating how the Taliban gained influence in local areas throughout Afghanistan. During the Infection phase, the Taliban organised in remote areas, such as the Pakistani tribal regions, from where they launched attacks into Afghanistan (Contagion). This prompted intervention by government forces and/or foreign troops, who, in their pursuit of the insurgents, inevitably harmed civilians and caused local destruction (Intervention). Consequently, these intervention forces were perceived by the locals as enemies to be fought against (Rejection). The crux of Kilcullen’s argument is that the local population viewed the intervention forces as more foreign than the arriving insurgents, and when faced with a choice between ‘more foreign’ and ‘less foreign’, they tended to support the latter.⁶³ He maintains throughout his book that the coalition’s military assaults on the enemy – in this case, the Taliban – exacerbate the situation and consequently bolster resistance (Rejection). The counterstrategy in an insurgency is to protect the civilian population. In other words, it is essential to convince the locals that the invading forces are there to protect them rather than to use their cities and fields as battlegrounds in a war against the Taliban.

Therefore, rather than pursuing the enemy, the primary mission of the invading forces should be to build local security structures rooted in the community – not an externally imposed Afghan national army, which locals perceive as more foreign than the Taliban and to which they are unlikely to be loyal.

According to Kilcullen and Petraeus, COIN must deliver precisely what the locals need, which fundamentally includes security, orderly conditions, a form of equitable legal system for resolving local conflicts and legitimate authorities; that is, authorities that *the locals* perceive as just.

As the next chapter describes, there are numerous accounts and testimonies indicating that the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) failed to meet the COIN strategy parameters. Instead, they poured significant resources into projects that the coalition forces regarded as necessary, often disregarding local community needs. The ISAF efforts also included the protection of local leaders who frequently lacked local community support. Similarly, initiatives aimed at generating goodwill did not achieve their objective of winning ‘hearts and minds’, as they were more often dictated by the coalition’s predetermined development goals rather than being grounded in the needs and interests of the local populace. Consequently, the people in the provinces became increasingly alienated from ISAF and shifted their loyalty towards the Taliban. The local authorities and government in Kabul both lost legitimacy primarily due to widespread corruption, but also because American forces, in many instances, collaborated with and relied on officials known locally to be corrupt and who acted more like mafia leaders than public servants prioritising security and public order.⁶⁴

Shifting American strategies

Despite challenges in Iraq and other regions, the United States made a concerted effort to identify the right strategy in Afghanistan. Early in the Obama presidency, for instance, his administration opened the door to negotiations with the Taliban. However, this occurred at a time when Obama and the US had become acutely aware of the significant problems plaguing the Afghan government, leading to outright conflict and a marked reduction in Afghanistan–US cooperation. In April 2009, General Stanley McChrystal assumed military command in Afghanistan, and shortly thereafter submitted a classified proposal for a new strategy. Some parts of this proposal were leaked, including his demand for substantial increases in the number of American troops – originally calling for 60,000 in the classified document, but later stating 30,000 in the leaked information, which Obama ultimately approved in December of that year. McChrystal advocated for a COIN strategy that included a considerable increase in humanitarian assistance and state-building efforts while downplaying the significance of Pakistani double-dealing. Initially, Obama was aligned with the COIN strategy; however, both his ambassador in Kabul, Karl Ikenberry, and Special Advisor Richard Holbrooke viewed Pakistan as the primary problem and were therefore highly critical of McChrystal’s assessment. The situation escalated when McChrystal, in a July 2010 interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, harshly criticised Ikenberry and Holbrooke while making light

of Vice President Joe Biden, and his staff expressed dissent regarding Obama's strategy, which had been outlined in a speech at West Point on December 1, 2009. This public criticism created a scandal, leading to McChrystal being relieved of duty.⁶⁵ The challenge facing Obama was that his strategy was undermined even before it could be implemented.

The significant increase in the scale of problems led the US to alter its strategy repeatedly from 2006 onwards, aiming to address challenges and halt the downward spiral.

The George W. Bush presidency (2001–09)

The objective of Bush's intervention was to eliminate al-Qaeda and thereby prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a base for global terrorism. This was to be achieved by removing the Taliban from power in Kabul. It was crucial for the Bush administration to establish a strategy that included ground troops, albeit on a limited scale, which is why the initial phase of the war was conducted in collaboration with the Northern Alliance.

After the capture of Kabul, the plan was for the international community to take over, or at least to be involved in the internationalisation of the state-building phase. This involved an international division of burdens and responsibilities, as reflected in the Bonn Process, a donor conference and support for the establishment of a new government and subsequent political processes. There was an understanding that it was necessary to disarm the many militias; however, neither the coalition nor the US was able to achieve this objective, resulting in militias and private armies contributing to a fragmented Afghan state. Militarily, the Americans adhered to a CT strategy until 2006, when the situation necessitated a new approach. Following an evaluation in late 2006, the Bush administration shifted its strategy to COIN.

The Barack Obama presidency (2009–17)

In connection with the transfer of foreign policy from the Bush administration to the Obama administration in January 2009, a new review was prepared in 2008 that Obama largely followed. However, he commissioned a new review from his own administration in early 2009. While a vocal critic of the Iraq War during his campaign, Obama viewed the War in Afghanistan as 'the good war' that needed to be won.⁶⁶ He immediately deployed an additional 21,000 troops to Afghanistan, quadrupled the number of diplomats and aid workers, and increased US aid by more than \$2 billion from 2009 to 2010.⁶⁷ In 2008, American diplomat Richard Holbrooke argued for the development of a strategy that regarded Afghanistan and Pakistan as a unified region, a concept he termed '*AfPak*'.⁶⁸ Holbrooke was appointed by Obama in January 2009 as his Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, after which the term AfPak became increasingly prevalent. Problems escalated, however, and General McChrystal's criticism of the strategy gave the impression that Obama's approach was a failure even before it had been implemented. Additionally, discussions surrounding Hamid Karzai's electoral fraud in

the August 2009 elections strained relations between Obama and the Afghan government, prompting Obama to request yet another new review in the autumn of 2009 (the third in a year). In December of that year, he announced the new strategy in a speech at the US Military Academy at West Point. He downplayed COIN and state-building, both of which were to be completely phased out by 2012, while escalating attacks on the Taliban and focusing on training Afghan security forces to enhance their capacity to operate without international support. The new strategy yielded progress, as the Taliban suffered losses and the number of Afghan security forces increased. However, it soon became evident that the military CT efforts were far from sufficient to defeat the Taliban and stabilise the country. At the same time, Pakistan continued to allow the Taliban to operate from its territory. In his West Point speech, Obama announced an increase in troop numbers to Afghanistan, bringing them to 140,000 in 2010, while also announcing a timeline for the withdrawal of American combat troops to be completed by 2016, although this timeline was modified several times.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the withdrawal began, and by the time of Obama's handover to Donald Trump, only approximately 9,800 American combat troops remained. By 2014, responsibility for security had been transferred to the Afghan security forces. At the same time Obama was scaling back cooperation with the Karzai government and phasing out COIN, he initiated explorations into US–Taliban negotiations that also involved the Kabul government. Building on his AfPak approach and in coordination with the Pakistani government, he escalated the drone campaign against the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, as well as al-Qaeda leaders in the border regions of Pakistan adjacent to Afghanistan. From 2009 onwards, the US reported how they were using drones to deliver missiles, resulting in the elimination of senior Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders. The most significant success of Obama's CT strategy occurred in May 2011, with the elimination of Osama bin Laden deep inside Pakistan in a special operation launched from Afghanistan.

The Donald Trump presidency (2017–21)

Donald Trump had campaigned on the promise to end the war in Afghanistan. In August 2017, however, he announced instead that the United States would aim to win the war. He increased the number of troops, moved away from state-building and COIN, and instead prioritised CT, which was to be strengthened by relaxing the rules of engagement. This approach resulted in an increase in collateral damage.⁷⁰ Already in April 2017, Trump demonstrated the consequences of strengthening the CT strategy by using the most powerful non-nuclear bomb in the US arsenal to obliterate an IS camp located in a cave complex. This group had been particularly active in conducting suicide bombings in Kabul and attacks in the provinces, significantly worsening the security situation. The use of such a powerful bomb created shockwaves in the Afghan underground and the ISKP camp, even impacting the Afghan government, which condemned its use for causing extensive harm to civilians. As Trump increased his focus on CT, criticism of the US for harming civilians also increased. In 2018, Trump changed his strategy and appointed Zalmay Khalilzad as his special representative in Afghanistan, his mandate being to

initiate direct negotiations with the Taliban. This led to an agreement, as described in the previous chapter, in which the Taliban accepted the American demands. As the US actively supported the Taliban with logistics, the US and Taliban had, de facto, become allies in the War on Terror.⁷¹

As outlined in the previous chapter, Joe Biden adhered to the agreement with the Taliban and withdrew the US from Afghanistan in August 2021.

Consequences of the early decisions

In the years leading up to 2005, as previously described, the Bush administration was largely optimistic that developments were on the right track, even as it prioritised its focus on Iraq and domestic issues. The situation deteriorated sharply, however, and challenges piled up. The explanation for this tragic development lies largely in the decisions made in the planning of the war.

Rather than negotiating with the Taliban, it was decided to remove the movement from power. This first pivotal decision to pursue a regime change strategy in Kabul led to two additional crucial decisions regarding *how* the Taliban should be removed and *what* should replace them in Kabul. Regarding the ‘how’ question, the options were either to employ very few American forces on Afghan soil to carry out the operation against the Taliban, collaborating instead with local militias, or to deploy a full-scale American invasion force, estimated to comprise around 50,000 soldiers. Ultimately, the decision was made to avoid a large invasion, prioritising the deployment of CIA teams and special forces while establishing cooperation with the Northern Alliance, fully aware that it consisted of illegitimate, corrupt warlords. The operation succeeded – surprisingly quickly, actually – in that the Taliban were already fleeing Kabul by November 2001. In exchange, the Northern Alliance moved in, which had a decisive influence on the ‘what’ question; specifically, who would take over in Kabul after the Taliban, as the warlords had already established control over key power bases and the US was unwilling to take responsibility for building up a new regime. The third crucial decision, about relinquishing the responsibility for building a new regime, was grounded in the American unwillingness to engage in state-building (Bush had generally rejected the US role in *nation-building* during his campaign). This gave the Northern Alliance significant influence over the Bonn Process and the successive governments that would rule Afghanistan throughout 20 years of war. The US thus found itself in a persistent dilemma: On one hand, the Bush administration was reluctant to commit to state-building; on the other, the US sought to be the dominant actor in military and security strategies, which continuously drew it back into the realm of state-building, seen as essential for achieving security and combating terrorism. As a result, the issue of illegitimate warlords within the Afghan government remained unresolved, and ambiguity persisted regarding the overall strategy, with ongoing tensions between unilateral American approaches and multilateral international cooperation and division of labour concerning building up a functioning regime. The US framing its efforts in Afghanistan as an anti-terror operation to be unilaterally managed while delegating decisions regarding

state-building to a multilateral and poorly coordinated effort led to unclear and uncoordinated decisions about war strategy and, not least, the implementation of the changing strategies.

Enlarged enemy

When the plan to wage war against the Taliban was finalised on 7 October 2001, President George W. Bush declared that the deadline for the ultimatum he had issued to the Taliban on 20 September regarding the surrender of Osama bin Laden had expired. In this context, Bush declared war on the Taliban, which commenced on the same day. This decision effectively established the Taliban as the principal enemy in the War on Terror in Afghanistan. The significance of this decision was profound, and it is noteworthy that in 2016, the US reclassified the Taliban from being the main enemy to a 'hostile force' with which it was possible to negotiate; a force that should not be attacked but primarily defended against.⁷²

The US made no distinction between terrorism and support for terrorism. George W. Bush made this clear in his address to the US Congress on 20 September 2001 (he had already communicated this perspective to his closest staff on the evening of 11 September, which eventually evolved into the Bush Doctrine). In his speech, he detailed the ultimatum he had presented to the Taliban via the US Embassy in Islamabad: The Taliban were to surrender Osama bin Laden to the US. This was the most critical point, but the Taliban were also to hand over all other al-Qaeda leaders (15 individuals), shut down training camps, arrest everyone at those camps (and turn them over to the US), and grant the US full access to conduct investigations at the al-Qaeda facilities.⁷³ The following day, through their ambassador in Islamabad, the Taliban announced that they would not surrender Osama bin Laden unless the US provided evidence of his involvement in the 9/11 attacks.⁷⁴ Then-CIA Director George Tenet recounts in his memoirs how CIA-Islamabad Chief Robert Grenier held two meetings with the Taliban second-in-command, Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Osmani, who was to relay the American demands to the leader, Mullah Omar, in Balochistan. He added that the Taliban could allow the Americans to apprehend bin Laden while turning a blind eye. The CIA rightly believed that the Taliban did not support the al-Qaeda attack on 11 September. At the second meeting, the CIA chief offered the Taliban leader Osmani American support to oust Mullah Omar if he would facilitate bin Laden's surrender. This never happened, however, as the Taliban failed to meet the demands of Bush's ultimatum, leading the US to conclude by early October that the deadline had expired and that it was prepared to initiate the war.⁷⁵ In his own book, Grenier explains that not only was he in contact with Osmani during the two meetings, but negotiations were resumed several times via satellite phone. As late as 28 October, Osmani contacted the CIA chief inquiring as to whether Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders could receive amnesty if they laid down their arms. Grenier did not dismiss this possibility but reiterated the demands regarding the delivery of bin Laden and the 'Arabs', referring to the al-Qaeda leaders. At that time, Mullah Omar and his people were on the run in their stronghold of Kandahar, where Pashtun militias, supported by the CIA

in Islamabad, were rebelling against the Taliban.⁷⁶ Later, there were negotiations between Hamid Karzai and the Taliban leadership regarding a ceasefire, but this was also rejected by the American administration, which confidently believed it had defeated the Taliban, rendering negotiations unnecessary.⁷⁷

Obviously, it is uncertain whether the United States would have refrained from initiating the war had bin Laden been delivered and the other demands met.⁷⁸ However, there is considerable evidence to suggest that the decision to wage war against the Taliban and to remove the movement from power – effectively executing a military regime change in Kabul – was made prior to the issuance of an ultimatum and the commencement of negotiations with the Taliban. George W. Bush explicitly states as much in his memoirs.⁷⁹ With his doctrine of not distinguishing between terrorists and those who support terrorism, such as by providing refuge to terrorists, Bush opened the possibility for states that had supported al-Qaeda by allowing them to reside within their territories, or which the US believed had otherwise supported terrorism, to receive a form of amnesty, provided they consistently renounced that support and acted accordingly by backing the US in the War on Terror. Conversely, states would be attacked if the US believed they continued to support al-Qaeda: ‘You are either with us or with the terrorists’, Bush declared to Congress on 20 September 2001. The radical implication of this message was that anyone who did not actively act in accordance with the US War on Terror risked becoming a military target. In Afghanistan, following the decision to wage war against the Taliban, this meant that there was essentially *no distinction* between the Taliban and al-Qaeda. As has become well known, this doctrine was also applied to Iraq alongside WMD allegations, as well as to Iran, which the US claimed to be providing refuge to fleeing Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters, and occasionally collaborating with al-Qaeda leaders.⁸⁰ Despite increasing evidence during the war indicating that Pakistan was, in fact, supporting the Afghan Taliban, this doctrine was *not* applied against Pakistan, as the US was too dependent on cooperation with the regime. The US had already acquired knowledge in 2002 that Pakistan was supporting the Taliban and other networks, despite the Pakistani president having pledged otherwise in 2001. However, the US was in the midst of preparing for war in Iraq, did not wish to be distracted by a conflict with Pakistan, and therefore chose to ignore Pakistan’s double-dealing.⁸¹ Moreover, at the outset of the war, the US had collaborated with the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to send Pashtun insurgent leaders from Pakistan to Afghanistan, and the Americans began a drone campaign in 2004 against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the Pakistani tribal areas. This campaign was dramatically escalated under Barack Obama in 2009 with Pakistani approval. Consequently, the legitimising narrative of the War on Terror had to balance the promotion of American values against national strategic security interests. This ‘double bookkeeping’ was delegitimising unto itself for the global War on Terror, both in Afghanistan and worldwide.

The most significant aspect was that the war against the Taliban had involved the United States in a genuine insurgency, which, from a historical perspective, has proven to be one of the most challenging types of warfare to conduct.⁸² The US had

its own experience with the Viet Cong from the Vietnam War, but there are many other examples, ranging from Napoleon's failure against the Spanish guerrillas to France's lost war in Algeria.

Legitimacy issues

Despite the ultimatum issued by the Bush administration to the Taliban, the question of whether to initiate war in Afghanistan was unlikely to be raised, as the decision had already been made during the negotiations. The more pertinent question, therefore, was how the war should be initiated, and the plan was to do so through prioritised collaboration with the Northern Alliance. This decision would prove to be a significant obstacle to establishing a functional, coherent and legitimate government in Kabul, which became an increasingly formidable challenge throughout the war, as the US and its coalition never garnered the support from Kabul necessary for stable development.⁸³

An attack on Afghanistan and the Taliban could not resemble the military operations carried out by Bill Clinton against al-Qaeda, which involved cruise missiles that hit nothing but abandoned al-Qaeda camps.⁸⁴ Time and again, Donald Rumsfeld and George Tenet emphasised that combating al-Qaeda and global terrorism was not a 'law and order' issue, which they rightly believed characterised Clinton's approach. Clinton's retaliatory strikes following the terrorist attacks on the embassies in East Africa were viewed by many Americans, particularly among Republican commentators and politicians, as unnecessarily cautious and ineffective. To avoid this, more than just cruise missiles and airstrikes were required; *boots on the ground* were necessary. Conversely, the Bush administration did not want the US looking like an occupying force in an attack on the Afghan people; thus, they aimed to avoid a full-scale invasion involving up to 50,000 troops, which was the figure discussed in the cabinet.⁸⁵ Consequently, they planned for small teams of special forces to be deployed, which could work together with local militant opposition groups, identify bombing targets and sending coordinates to the air force. For this to succeed, the special forces and US military would need substantial alliances in Afghanistan willing to combat the Taliban and al-Qaeda under American command. During the resistance against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s, the CIA had collaborated closely with groups that had subsequently coalesced in the north during the ensuing civil war with the Taliban. The Northern Alliance was established in December 1996, when the Taliban, with Pakistani support, ultimately controlled the majority of Afghanistan, including Kabul. This alliance comprised groups representing ethnicities other than the dominant Pashtuns, who constitute the largest ethnic group.⁸⁶ The CIA re-established connections and sent in an experienced agent with a team of ten individuals under the codename 'Jawbreaker', who flew around the area in helicopters with suitcases full of US dollars, contacting Northern Alliance warlords already known to the CIA.⁸⁷ More CIA teams followed, making agreements with these warlords and recruiting so-called moderate Taliban fighters. This strategy fed American expectations regarding support on the ground from more than 30,000 fighters in the north. As negotiations with

Uzbekistan progressed and the US could deploy aircraft to bases in the neighbouring country, additional CIA teams (and eventually US special forces) were deployed, operating in unusually direct collaboration. Simultaneously, it became possible to send humanitarian aid to Afghans from both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which was carried out on the direct orders of George W. Bush, who believed it was crucial to send a clear signal to the Afghan people that the US was not at war with the Afghan civilian population but with the Taliban, which, according to the US, had betrayed the Afghan people by allowing al-Qaeda to operate in Afghanistan. The US served this narrative to the Afghans through thousands of leaflets dropped together with the humanitarian aid.⁸⁸ While contacts were successfully established with the Northern Alliance warlords, mobilising alliances in the south proved more challenging, although a number of Pashtun tribal leaders with access to militias did join.⁸⁹ The CIA office in Islamabad deemed the southern Pashtun militias important, both because southern Afghanistan was the Taliban heartland and because the border with Pakistan needed to be closed as an escape route. Moreover, the US was aware of how the Northern Alliance did not enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of the entire Afghan populace.⁹⁰ During his presidential campaign, George W. Bush emphasised that American troops should under no circumstances be used for state-building.⁹¹ Time and again, during planning, the war cabinet deferred the Kabul issue with remarks about how the fate and status of the capital after the fall of the Taliban should be a UN matter. CIA teams were also involved in the mobilisation of the southern tribal leaders, while special forces came in from aircraft carriers stationed in the Persian Gulf and from Uzbekistan.⁹² In the south and north alike, the Americans had search-and-rescue teams on standby for deployment if necessary. This also required base facilities in Uzbekistan, as did the extensive humanitarian aid efforts.

The Northern Alliance or Pashtun insurgent militias?

The Pashtun tribal leaders and Northern Alliance warlords had their own distinct and opposing interests. This was a recurring issue in the context of establishing local provincial governments, where the appointed governors faced resistance from the local population. As a result, these local governments required ISAF protection, which reinforced local perceptions of being governed by a foreign occupation, leading many to seek towards the Taliban.⁹³

The CIA office in Islamabad strongly encouraged and supported the Pashtun uprising against the Taliban in the south. In the years leading up to 9/11, it worked actively to organise a Pashtun rebellion against the Taliban leadership in an effort to create an ally in the search for Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda leaders. There were ongoing negotiations between the CIA office and Pashtun insurgent leaders, from among whom Hamid Karzai would go on to become the most well-known figure. Robert L. Grenier also notes in his book that the CIA had secured coordinates for Mullah Omar's location twice after his flight from Kabul and requested air support from the Pentagon via the CIA Counterterrorism Center (CTC) to bomb Mullah Omar and his followers. Both requests were denied on the grounds

that the Pentagon only accepted coordinates collected directly by Americans and not by Afghan CIA agents. Grenier states that the CTC prioritised collaboration with the Northern Alliance entirely, while the Pashtun insurgents in the south and the operations of the CIA office in Islamabad were either overlooked or outright ignored. In other words, there was already a conflict in the planning and early phases of the war regarding the execution of operations in Afghanistan between the CIA in Washington and the CIA in Islamabad, which had the most expertise concerning the Taliban and al-Qaeda, whereas the CTC was more familiar with the Northern Alliance and thus insisted on prioritising military support for it. If Grenier's account is accurate – and there is no reason to doubt its veracity – there was an opportunity to better organise the war against the Taliban with Pashtun militias, but this option was ultimately rejected.⁹⁴ On two occasions, the Americans had opportunity to attack Mullah Omar directly, which the Pentagon and CTC declined, allowing him to establish himself in Pakistan instead.⁹⁵ Another option that was not on the agenda was involvement of the Taliban in the Bonn Process (or subsequently, as Karzai attempted). Historian Carter Malkasian from the US Naval Postgraduate School quotes the American leader of the Bonn negotiations, Ambassador Jim Dobbins, as having responded to a question about involving the Taliban as follows: 'Out of the question. They have been defeated. Why should they be included?'"⁹⁶

Dysfunctional state and lack of accountability for legitimate governance

The greatest challenge associated with the decision to ally with the Northern Alliance was what would occur in Kabul after the Taliban fled and the Northern Alliance moved in. The war cabinet was acutely aware of how the Northern Alliance warlords, who had been rebelling against the Taliban since 1996, had their own power-political agendas and that they held little legitimacy among the vast majority of Afghans. The United States wanted to avoid responsibility for the situation, which was viewed as state-building, and delegated the process to the international community while maintaining unilateral control over the overarching military strategy in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, the application of the Bush Doctrine effectively resulted in the implementation of a regime-change strategy: The war aimed not only to defeat, kill or capture al-Qaeda fighters, but also to remove the Taliban from power and treat Taliban fighters on par with al-Qaeda terrorists. The major challenge with this strategy was that it raised the question of what and who would replace the Taliban as the leaders of the Afghan state. Thus, the Bush Doctrine in the War on Terror led to the unintended direct involvement of the US in state-building and the establishment of a functional state in Afghanistan, despite assurances within the war cabinet that this was not on the agenda together with official categorical denials of such intentions to the American public – until they became no longer credible.

The regime change strategy effectively led the United States to engage in state-building from the outset, including the creation of a government to succeed the

Taliban and the appointment of Hamid Karzai as president. This involvement was *instrumental in providing legitimacy to a new state-bearing regime in Kabul*. However, the incorporation of warlords into this regime (without their disarmament) meant that the new government faced challenges from both the population and internal fragmentation from the very beginning.⁹⁷

The challenge of legitimacy naturally extended not only to the Afghan populace but also to the American electorate and the international community. The global War on Terror and the declarations to promote American values, such as freedom, democracy and human rights, were vital for garnering support for the war from the American nation and the international community alike. However, support waned as the dysfunctionality of the new regime became increasingly apparent alongside a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan.

Additionally, direct American assistance to the Afghan government in Kabul, including the establishment of Afghan security forces (army and police), at times reached a scale that the Afghan government lacked the capacity to manage. This directly contributed to a trend that exacerbated corruption.⁹⁸ The state and nation-building project effectively had to start from scratch, in collaboration with Afghan officials and leaders, many of whom were warlords with their own interests, despite receiving titles as ministers.⁹⁹ A complex array of tasks that needed to be undertaken in an environment often characterised by significant security risks was outsourced to private firms, frequently with contracts that hindered transparency and accountability. A study from the *Costs of War* project has estimated that the US Department of Defense paid private firms \$108 billion to perform tasks without adequate oversight of their execution.¹⁰⁰

Not disarming the militias allowed various groups to operate as states within a state, resulting in a form of ‘Lebanonisation’ of the Kabul government. The Lebanese constitutional provisions that ensure representation for religious communities in both parliament and government have immobilised the Lebanese political system, as different groups are solely interested in securing their own power and resources. This makes it nearly impossible to implement decisions for the common good and to hold anyone accountable to the community. In practice, the decision to prioritise the Northern Alliance and give it a role in the governance of Afghanistan resulted in a ‘Lebanonised’ and politically paralysed government, a situation that persisted throughout the war because the US was unwilling to assume full responsibility for reforming it, and the international community was unable to do so.

An alternative would have been to insist on the disarmament of all militias to establish a state monopoly on violence and to negotiate with the Taliban; for instance, when their leaders fled from Kabul to Kandahar and offered to lay down their arms, potentially involving some of them in the Bonn Process. The decision not to negotiate was accepted by the international coalition, which worked to assist in the establishment of the new regime, thereby *de facto* accepting the presence of warlords with private armies as part of the regime. This approach also meant that the solution to the War on Terror encompassed both combatting al-Qaeda and the elimination of the Taliban.

Conclusion

This chapter has described how the atmosphere following 9/11 called for a decisive response from the United States. The context influenced the decision-making process, which demanded positions on several key questions:

- Whether the United States should focus its response and military action in Afghanistan solely on combating al-Qaeda, or if it should also seek to remove the Taliban from power, thereby creating a situation in which the war would involve the establishment of a new regime and a military campaign for the defeat and elimination of the Taliban. The latter task was significantly larger and more complicated than simply pursuing al-Qaeda leaders.
- Whether the United States should deploy ground troops – a full-scale American invasion force estimated to require 50,000 soldiers – or limit its involvement to a very small number of special forces to support troops from the Northern Alliance, who would, in turn, be difficult to control.
- How the US should balance its unilateral leadership of the War on Terror with what ultimately became a multilateral nation-building effort. This discussion was partly about whether the war should maintain a singular focus or if it should be integrated from the outset into a much larger and broader effort in the War on Terror, with the question of a military operation against Iraq emerging on the agenda quite early on.

The chapter has demonstrated that the decision regarding the regime change operation and the war against the Taliban simultaneously entailed a rejection of negotiations. The Taliban and al-Qaeda were framed as two sides of the same coin, resulting in the creation of a far larger and more complex adversary than if attention had been focused solely on al-Qaeda. Opting to ally with the Northern Alliance had significant implications for both the legitimacy and nature of the nation-building efforts. The decision to relinquish responsibility for the establishment of a new regime and for nation-building created ambiguity regarding accountability for the formation of a coherent and functional government in Kabul. Consequently, the three decisions made during the initial phase of the war had ramifications not only for the progression of the war but also for its conclusion and outcome.

The analysis of these three pivotal decisions, their development and their consequences also reveals a range of internal dynamics within the American administration. These dynamics unfolded in the tension between normative political priorities and the realities on the ground, as well as in the rivalries between authorities and agencies, such as that between the CTC at the CIA headquarters in Langley and the CIA office in Islamabad. As the war progressed, the US found itself enacting precisely what the war cabinet had initially sought to avoid: Deploying a large invasion force that effectively led to the perception among Afghans of a conventional foreign occupation of Afghanistan; becoming dependent on Pakistan; and engaging in active financial, economic and development-policy involvement in nation-building efforts within a context marked

by institutional dysfunction, corruption and a lack of legitimacy. Ultimately, as the previous chapter has illustrated, the Americans ended up prioritising direct negotiations with the Taliban at a time when the Taliban were at its absolute strongest and it had become evident that the insurgency could not be defeated militarily.

Notes

- 1 In his memoirs, former CIA Director George Tenet explains how the cooperation with Pakistan occurred after significant pressure from Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. See George Tenet (2007), *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA*, Harper Collins, p. 181. Armitage's meeting with ISI Chief Mahmoud Ahmed on 13 September 2001, as well as his ultimate demands on Pakistan, which were unexpectedly met, are documented by the declassified sources in the National Security Archive. See The National Security Archive, 'Secret U.S. message to Mullah Omar: "every pillar of the Taliban regime will be destroyed"', 22 September 2011.
- 2 Bob Woodward (2002), *Bush at War*, Simon & Schuster, pp. 172–173; Condoleezza Rice (2011), *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington*, Broadway Books, pp. 90–97; Donald Rumsfeld (2011), *Known and Unknown: A Memoir*, Sentinel, pp. 382–384. For the planning of the war, see also Mark R. Folse (2022), *Operation Enduring Freedom September 2001–March 2022*, Center of Military History; Joseph J. Collins (2015), 'Initial planning and execution in Afghanistan and Iraq', in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, pp. 21–88.
- 3 See Woodward, *Bush at War*. In the beginning of the book, the author includes a 'Cast of Characters', and in his review of the initial meeting of the war cabinet at Camp David in Chapter 6 (pp. 74–92), the more specific distribution of roles is outlined. The National Security Advisor in George W. Bush's first administration, Condoleezza Rice, also describes the organisation in her memoirs. Rice, *No Higher Honor*, pp. 71–98. Other senior officials in the administration, such as Attorney General John D. Ashcroft and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul D. Wolfowitz, were occasionally invited to participate in the war cabinet meetings. See Woodward, *Bush at War*, p. 42.
- 4 Lars E. Andersen (2002), 'Bioterrorismens retorik: fra anthrax hoaxes i Kansas til mediemiltbrand i Ålborg', in Lars Qvortrup (ed.), *Mediernes 11. September*, Gads Forlag.
- 5 "'It will happen'", experts assess. Consequently, the US Army, Navy and Air Force, along with the global economy's stock market, risk being overtaken by guerrilla groups. The only question is when it will occur, according to Assistant Professor Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen from the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen', *Information*, 'Næste gang bliver det værre' (own translation) 13 September 2001.
- 6 US Congress (1996), *H.R.3730 – Defense Against Weapons of Mass Destruction Act of 1996*.
- 7 Gavin Cameron et al. (2000), '1999 WMD terrorism chronology: Incidents involving sub-national actors and chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear materials', *The Nonproliferation Review* 7(2), 157–174.
- 8 FBI (n.d.), *Amerithrax or Anthrax Investigation*; Jonathan B. Tucker (2000), *Toxic Terror: Assessing Terrorist Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons*, MIT Press.
- 9 Woodward, *Bush at War*, pp. 49, 60–62, 82–85; Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, p. 359.
- 10 Woodward, *Bush at War*, p. 49. The Iraq plans are detailed by Collins, 'Initial planning and execution', and reference is made to Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, pp. 358–359, 425; Rice, *No Higher Honor*, pp. 86–87 and Tommy Franks (2004), *American Soldier*, Harper Collins, p. 252. See also Douglas J. Feith (2008), *War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism*, Harper Collins, pp. 63–78.

- 11 These contrasting perceptions of the War in Afghanistan and the Iraq War, which began in 2003, continued to be relevant for a long time. For example, President Obama referred to the War in Afghanistan during his first election campaign as 'The Good War', the Iraq War being 'The Bad War'. For Obama, it was important that the war in Afghanistan went well, especially after Iraq ended in failure and the scandal over the absence of WMDs. Ultimately, however, Obama's name had to be added to the list of those who were forced to acknowledge that Afghanistan could not be transformed into a well-functioning democratic state modelled after the West. See, for example, *The New York Times*, 'The Afghan War and the evolution of Obama', 1 January 2017.
- 12 Richard Hass is quoted here from the American analysis of the War in Afghanistan; Michael Cohen et al. (2023), 'For want of a nail: The flawed assumptions that drove twenty years of US engagement in Afghanistan', The Afghanistan Assumptions Project, June 2023.
- 13 Tim Weiner (2008), *CIA: Fra Den Kolde Krig til Krigen mod Terror*, Lindhardt og Ringhof, pp. 448–457 [Original English version: Tim Weiner (2007), *The Legacy of Ashes – The History of The CIA*. New York City: Doubleday].
- 14 The National Security Archive (2010), 'The Iraq War: Part I: The U.S. Prepares for Conflict, 2001', 22 September 2010.
- 15 Franks, *American Soldier*, p. 315; Robert S. Litwak (2007), *Regime Change: U.S. Strategy through the Prism of 9/11*, Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 44–48; Steve Coll (2019), *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, Penguin Books, p. 102; Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, pp. 427–428; Rice, *No Higher Honor*, pp. 86–89; Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay (2003), *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy*, Brookings Institution Press, p. 105.
- 16 In June 1979, US President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, devised a plan for an American response if the USSR invaded Afghanistan. Iran was undergoing a revolution that had transformed the country from a close US ally to an implacable enemy. The previous year, communists had seized power in Afghanistan, and there were strong indications that the USSR intended to invade the country to assist the communist government in Kabul in combating Islamic insurgent groups. The Soviet military rolled into Afghanistan on 24 December 1979. Americans were concerned that the USSR would exploit the unrest and instability in Iran resulting from the revolution to extend its invasion of Afghanistan all the way to the Persian Gulf. Such a scenario would undermine the American containment strategy against the USSR and clear a path for Soviet access to the ice-free ports in the Gulf, thereby granting access to the major oceans and control over the significant oil resources in the region. A committee under Brzezinski thus outlined an American response in the form of massive support for Afghan insurgent groups in collaboration with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The plan was put into action immediately following the Soviet invasion. Local groups united, receiving additional support from thousands of Muslim volunteers from the Middle East, North Africa and Asia. This development initiated a chain of events that ultimately led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. See John Cooley (1999), *Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism*, Pluto Press, chapter 1; Steve Coll (2004), *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*, Penguin Books, pp. 21–52; Lars E. Andersen (2007), 'Fra amerikansk jihad til jihad mod Amerika: USA's partisankrig i Afghanistan 1979–1992', in Mikkel Thorup and Morten Brænder (ed.), *Antiterrorismens idéhistorie: Stater og vold i 500 år*, Aarhus University Press, pp. 181–193.
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- 20 Tenet, *Center of the Storm*, p. 178.
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- 24 Robert L. [Grenier \(2015\)](#), *88 Days to Kandahar: A CIA Diary*, Simon and Schuster, pp. 265–274.
- 25 Collins, ‘Initial planning and execution’, p. 23.
- 26 A Brookings report cites the findings of the 9/11 Commission, which was established to investigate how the attacks could occur, stating: ‘Two and a half years after the attacks, in the summer of 2004, the Commission finished its work and released its report. The overriding conclusion was that the government’s principal failure in 9/11 was a failure to “connect the dots.” What that meant was that pieces of the puzzle were to be found in many corners of the U.S. government but that no one connected the dots well enough or in a timely enough manner to predict with sufficient accuracy the attack that came’. See Elaine Kamarck, ‘9/11 and the reinvention of the US intelligence community’, *Brookings*, 27 August 2021.
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- 28 Gerges, *The Far Enemy*, p. 12.
- 29 Bergen, *Jagten på Osama*, pp. 33–34.
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- 35 Coll, *The Bin Ladens*, p. 488.
- 36 Stenersen, *Brothers in Jihad*.
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 - 39 Romain Malejacq (2019), *Warlord Survival: The Delusion of State Building in Afghanistan*, Cornell University Press, pp. 146–160; Craig Whitlock (2021), *The Afghanistan Papers*, Simon & Schuster, pp. 125–127.
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 - 54 Javid Ahmad, 'What drives insider attacks in Afghanistan? Taliban infiltration is a major factor', *Foreign Affairs*, 5 April 2017; Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, pp. 64–66.
 - 55 Bush, *Decision Points*, pp. 200–202; Woodward, *Bush at War*, pp. 158–160.
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 - 57 Woodward, *Bush at War*, p. 81.
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- 64 Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, p. 133.
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- 71 U.S. Department of State, Statement, ‘Joint declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for bringing peace to Afghanistan’, 2 February 2020; *Berlingske Tidende*, ‘Taleban er ikke længere fjende, men allieret i USAs krig mod terror’, 20 July 2020; *Task & Purpose*, ‘The US is apparently providing “limited” support for the Taliban against ISIS’, 10 March 2020: The article cites and includes a YouTube link to the hearing of General Frank McKenzie in the House Armed Services Committee in March 2020; *The Washington Post*, ‘Our secret Taliban air force: Inside the clandestine U.S. campaign to help our longtime enemy defeat ISIS’, 22 October 2020.
- 72 ‘Meanwhile, the U.S. military put the Taliban into a nebulous new category. It was still a hostile force, but not necessarily the enemy. Obama administration officials had concluded that the only way to end the war and to stabilise Afghanistan was for the Afghan government to negotiate a peace deal with the Taliban’; Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, p. 235.
- 73 Speech, George W. Bush, ‘Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress’, 20 September 2001.
- 74 *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, ‘Afghanistan: Taliban refuses to hand over Bin Laden’, 21 September 2001. In the spring of 2001 (prior to 9/11), negotiations took place between the American ambassador to Pakistan, Kabir Mohabbat, regarding the extradition of Osama bin Laden for prosecution in the US for his involvement in the attacks against American embassies in East Africa in 1998. According to then-Taliban Ambassador Abdul Salam Zaeef, a series of meetings were held. The Taliban proposed various suggestions, such as extraditing bin Laden for prosecution in a third country or before the International Court of Justice in The Hague, but the US rejected these proposals. See Abdul Salam Zaeef (2010), *My Life with the Taliban*, Hurst, p. 136.
- 75 Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 197.
- 76 Grenier, *88 Days*, pp. 252–254.
- 77 Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan*, pp. 73–74.
- 78 Tenet, *Center of the Storm*, pp. 182–183. Anne Stenersen argues that Mullah Omar’s reluctance to hand over Osama bin Laden, who was by no means popular among senior Taliban officials, stemmed from a fear that other factions would depose them for betraying Islamic hospitality. See Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, p. 4. See also an interview related to the publication of her book, which is based on extensive studies of

- primary al-Qaeda sources and documents. Stenersen asserts that al-Qaeda was not – as otherwise commonly perceived in the US war cabinet – a group driven by a fanatical religious ideology, but rather a well-organised group with a revolutionary agenda aimed at overthrowing regimes in the Middle East. The book focuses on al-Qaeda and only to a lesser extent on its relationship with the Taliban, although this relationship is indeed addressed where relevant. However, Stenersen analyses the Taliban–al-Qaeda relationship in her similarly well-documented PhD dissertation based on primary sources: Stenersen, *Brothers in Jihad*. For the interview, see *videnskab.dk*, ‘Taliban og al-Qaida var slet ikke så tæt knyttede’, 11 September 2012.
- 79 Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 191.
 - 80 Bruce Riedel (2010), ‘The mysterious relationship between Al-Qa`ida and Iran’, *CTC Sentinel* 7(3), pp. 1–3.
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 - 85 Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, pp. 341–347; Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 191.
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 - 91 Statement, George W. Bush, ‘User clip: George W. Bush on nation building’, 11 October 2000.
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 - 94 Najem Rafique (2015), ‘Book review: 88 days to Kandahar: A CIA diary. Robert L. Grenier’. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015’, *Strategic Studies*, pp. 147–150. See also Joseph W. Wippl (2015), ‘The results of conflicted policy’, *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 29(1), 187–191.

- 95 Grenier, *88 Days*, pp. 214–254; for insights into the conflict between the Counterterrorist Center (CTC) and the CIA in Islamabad, see also pp. 60–66. CTC, which Grenier subsequently became the director of, is characterised as follows: ‘But while they may have known a lot about terrorists, those in the CTC often exhibited little understanding of the cultures, institutions, and social and political dynamics of the regions where those terrorists operated’ (p. 65). Grenier also cites a ‘senior staffer’ from the National Security Council, who responded to Grenier’s attempt to explain the plans to drive a wedge between the Taliban and al-Qaeda with the following question: ‘You mean there’s a distinction between the two?’, Grenier, *88 Days*, p. 64.
- 96 Malkasian, *American War in Afghanistan*, p. 70.
- 97 Kenneth Katzman and Clayton Thomas (2017), *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service; The Council on Foreign Relations already provided an overview of the warlords and the problems they posed for establishing a representative, sustainable, effective and legitimate government early on. Esther Pan, ‘Afghanistan: Karzai vs. the warlords’, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 15 February 2005. Regarding state-building and legitimacy; see Whitlock, *The Afghanistan Papers*, pp. 48–49; Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerilla*, pp. 46–48; Jackson and Weigand: ‘The Taliban’s war’, pp. 143–148.
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5 Military Capacity Building

The Main Problems

Introduction

This chapter presents the challenges involved in the military capacity building of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) in Afghanistan.¹ It demonstrates that capacity building was an area of focus from the early stages of the war. Nevertheless, there was no one with overall responsibility for – or who ‘measured’ – whether the ANDSF had developed the capabilities required to plan, lead units and combat the strengthened adversary that the US and NATO left to the ANDSF.

Initially, the chapter outlines the thoughts and ideals underpinning military capacity building and security sector reforms in Afghanistan: A long-term focus, Afghan ownership and a coherent international effort. These were three core ideals embedded in all of the political agreements and strategies behind NATO’s interventions.

The chapter thereafter consists of both historical and thematic sections. It begins by describing the key shifts in capacity building efforts from 2001 onwards. This is followed by the thematic section, which highlights the significant challenges that contributed to the insufficient capacity of the ANDSF to defeat the Taliban in the final phase of the war.

Overall, the chapter illustrates why the NATO measures that were about establishing effective defence and security forces in Afghanistan – first through the ISAF mission (International Security Assistance Force) and subsequently through the RSM (Resolute Support Mission) – were unsuccessful.

Sources

The chapter is based on existing evaluations of military capacity building and analyses of the overall international effort in Afghanistan over a 20-year period. Reports from the US evaluation agency (the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction – SIGAR) are a central element, and several of the points align with the key conclusions from SIGAR’s final evaluation of the causes of the collapse of the ANDSF in 2021, as outlined in the report *Why the Afghan Security Forces Collapsed* (2023). In addition, the chapter draws on reports from the International Crisis Group and RAND, as well as country-specific evaluations, including previous Norwegian and Swedish inquiries.

Background: Sustainability, ownership and coherence

The capacity building of the ANDSF was part of a broader effort that also addressed civilian capacity development and the provision of military security. Together, these three elements constituted the international mission, which, under the framework of UN Security Council resolutions and the Bonn Agreement of 2001, aimed to create a free, independent and politically inclusive Afghanistan based on democratic principles. Thus, there were three pillars underpinning the international effort: (1) Security for Afghans and the international mission, (2) the establishment of national defence and security forces under democratic control, and (3) a civilian development initiative, including the provision of humanitarian aid and disaster relief.²

On 12 September 2001, the day after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1368, which sanctioned the right of the United States to use armed force under Article 51 of the UN Charter, and urged all member states to cooperate in holding al-Qaeda and the Taliban accountable for the attacks.³ On 7 October, the US launched Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), a military intervention that dismantled existing al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and expelled the Taliban regime from Kabul and the northern cities of Afghanistan, albeit without capturing Osama bin Laden. Afghanistan suddenly found itself without a government and a functioning security sector capable of ensuring the authority of a future government in the provinces and districts outside Kabul. This comprehensive effort was predicated on the understanding that the political stability of states stems from government control over the security sector, including the police, armed forces and the legal system.

The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1378 on 14 November 2001, calling on member states to assist the Afghan people in establishing a new, legitimate and effective government capable of providing security for its populace and preventing Afghanistan from again becoming a base for international terrorism.⁴ State-building and capacity development thus became embedded in the international effort, as articulated in the Bonn Agreement of December 2001, declarations from international donor conferences in 2002, and *the Afghanistan Compact* of 2006.⁵ The underlying premise was that the Taliban were not considered a legitimate government, and the Afghan people should be supported in rebuilding the state. The Afghanistan Compact outlined the framework for future cooperation between Afghanistan and the international community across various sectors, including the establishment of the ANDSF. The agreement specified that the capacity building and numerical strength of the ANDSF should be based on qualitative assessments of the units and take local political and economic conditions into account.⁶

The international military and civilian efforts were all structured around three guiding principles. Firstly, they were to focus on long-term solutions for security in Afghanistan. It was through the *sustainable* rebuilding of political, economic and military capacity that Afghanistan could independently ensure its security and prevent future terrorist attacks originating from the country. Secondly, this long-term development was to be based on local conditions, traditions and culture, with

a pronounced respect for Afghan *ownership and pace*. Thirdly, it was crucial to ensure sufficient *coordination and coherence* between the various national and international initiatives, as well as across different sectors. The ideal from the outset, as articulated in UN and NATO resolutions and statements, was that military security efforts should be synchronised with civilian development initiatives, with both serving as a foundation for building the capacity of Afghanistan to ensure its own security.

When UN Security Council Resolution 1386 established ISAF on 20 December 2001, it was grounded in Annex 1 of the Bonn Agreement. Consequently, the ISAF mandate was to assist the interim Afghan government in establishing security in and around Kabul, primarily through the formation and training of new national defence and security forces in Afghanistan.⁷ On 13 October 2003, ISAF's area of operations was expanded to cover all of Afghanistan, with its military efforts continuing to be based on the Bonn Agreement, which specifically emphasised the reconstruction of the Afghan army and police.⁸

The long-term focus, Afghan ownership and coherent international effort were embedded in all of the political agreements and strategies underpinning NATO's military operations. UN Security Council Resolution 1776 of 19 September 2007 defined the long-term focus of assistance to Afghanistan as 'to train, mentor and empower the Afghan national security forces'.⁹ The capacity building of both the Afghan army and police thus became ISAF's primary mission from 2007 onwards.¹⁰ In agreement with the Afghan central government, NATO decided in late 2014 to dissolve ISAF and to establish the Resolute Support Mission (RSM). The intention was to complete the handover of security responsibilities to Afghanistan, after which the continued capacity building of the ANDSF would be the sole remaining task for NATO units in the country.¹¹ In April 2021, NATO decided to initiate the withdrawal of units under RSM, effective from 1 May 2021, as NATO no longer saw a 'military solution to the challenges Afghanistan faces'.¹²

Military capacity building in Afghanistan emerged in the context of a broader trend towards a 'comprehensive approach' and demand for integrated security and development assistance in the late 1990s. Particularly the literature and practice that developed around security sector reform (SSR) defined the initial conceptualisation of capacity building: It focused on establishing effective security sectors, including defence, police and judiciary. One of the core ideas behind SSR is the holistic approach to security, political reform and economic development, which is aimed at facilitating a smoother transition from conflict to peace. Moreover, in conjunction with civilian and economic development efforts, SSR concerns itself with building professional security forces that support well-functioning governance structures.¹³ SSR thereby underscores the necessity of military capacity building within the framework of essential political and economic reforms.¹⁴ States affected by conflict and instability cannot achieve stabilisation merely by establishing, training and equipping defence and security forces; rather, stabilisation necessitates comprehensive and long-term reforms that ensure civilian control over the military and uphold the rule of law for the citizenry.¹⁵ Consequently, SSR is closely

linked to state-building, as the centralisation and control of security and the judiciary form the foundational basis for defining effective states.¹⁶

But the SSR approach has also faced criticism.¹⁷ One critique of previous state-building projects concerns the disconnection of SSR from ‘liberal peacebuilding’, which complicates the establishment of ownership grounded in national traditions and culture.¹⁸ The relationship between external objectives and local ownership is a recurring challenge for SSR, which rarely succeeds in building capacity for self-security based on local solutions and the prioritisation of security challenges.¹⁹ Another significant challenge for SSR is the relationship between long-term sustainable solutions and short-term political success stories in donor countries.²⁰ Finally, a particular challenge for SSR is that the reforms essentially focus on the conflict-to-peace transition, thereby inadequately addressing states still plagued by civil war, insurgency or other forms of armed conflict. For SSR to be successful, there must be a minimum level of security and political stability to build upon.²¹ When existing structures are taken into account, SSR is better positioned to establish local ownership and maintain a long-term focus on the capacity for self-security.²² In Afghanistan in 2001, there were no security or existing structures upon which to build, which from the outset complicated long-term solutions with local ownership.²³

Twenty years of military capacity building

Initially, the United States chose to combat al-Qaeda and the Taliban militarily without engaging in a large-scale state-building effort (see the chapter on the US War in Afghanistan). However, as various local militia forces gained power and established small security monopolies in the absence of the Taliban, the US was compelled to adjust its approach early on and reluctantly initiate a comprehensive reform of the fragmented security sector.²⁴ In the spring of 2002, the G8 countries held a donor meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, where the future process of SSR in Afghanistan was discussed.²⁵ Here, the G8 nations agreed on a sectoral division of SSR responsibilities, assigning five countries to oversee specific sectors:²⁶ The US was tasked with military reform, Germany with police reform, Italy with legal reform, the UK with drug control, and Japan with the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of Afghan militia forces. The consequence of this sectoral division of responsibility for SSR was a poor separation of the capacity building of the Afghan army and police, as well as between the Afghan police and the establishment of a central Afghan judicial system.²⁷ This division particularly challenged the development of the Afghan police, which became fragmented between the American fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban and efforts to ensure a fair and visible exercise of police authority in Afghanistan.²⁸ Given that the US was by far the largest provider of economic assistance and troops in Afghanistan, capacity building often prioritised American tactical needs over the long-term development of Afghanistan’s security sectors.²⁹ The American focus on counterinsurgency in Afghanistan until 2011 (see the chapter on the US war in Afghanistan) and subsequently on withdrawing from Afghanistan fundamentally altered the essence of SSR.

Military capacity building transitioned from being a tool for transformation and the establishment of security sectors in a post-conflict nation to a 'train and equip' process aimed at addressing an internal insurgency, eventually becoming a political instrument for withdrawal.³⁰ These shifts must be understood in context, as the counterinsurgency efforts in the years 2006 to 2011 led to a growing interest among the coalition nations to hand over combat operations to the host nation and assume a progressively more withdrawn role.³¹

The US officially initiated the building of the ANDSF in May 2002, when special operations forces under OEF trained small infantry units in individual combat skills and tactical capabilities for maintaining security in and around Kabul.³² After NATO assumed control of ISAF in 2003, particularly following the expansion of ISAF throughout Afghanistan in 2005–06, capacity building became supportive of counterinsurgency efforts and thus directly aimed at combating the Taliban. As the political objectives of the US and NATO evolved and the relationship between Washington and Kabul deteriorated, the strength of the ANDSF became a guiding factor for the transfer of security responsibility to the Afghan government. In the following, the capacity building efforts will be examined in three phases characterised by counterterrorism (2001–06), counterinsurgency and transition (2006–11) and exit from Afghanistan (2011–21).

2001–06: Counterterrorism within the framework of Operation Enduring freedom

In the period leading up to the NATO takeover of the ISAF mission on 11 August 2003, the US conducted the training of the Afghan military, with bilateral support from countries such as France and the UK. The US focused on training soldiers for operational units, while the UK led the training of non-commissioned officers and officer cadets. France established a general staff course for educating the highest military leaders, and Germany set up training programmes for senior police leadership and developed training facilities and police stations in Kabul.³³ Starting in the autumn of 2002, officer and police schools were established in Kabul. However, structured collaboration and coordination among these initiatives were lacking. This was primarily due to the American focus on combating al-Qaeda and the division of SSR responsibilities, but contrasting national perspectives on capacity building among the US, UK, Germany and France also contributed to the lack of direction for the establishment of the ANDSF.³⁴ The US invasion of Iraq in March 2003 came at the cost of the focus on capacity building in Afghanistan, and despite the deteriorating security situation, coordination among capacity-building efforts fell away.³⁵ Military capacity building became a niche task for the remaining American units in Afghanistan.

As the security situation in Afghanistan worsened significantly in late 2004,³⁶ the US assumed responsibility for the development of the Afghan police in April 2005, eventually taking over full responsibility for police reform from Germany in 2007.³⁷ To improve the coordination of overall capacity building, the US established the Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A) in 2006.

This command held overarching responsibility for both the Afghan army and the Afghan police. However, this transfer resulted in the development of the Afghan police now being managed by the US Department of Defense, which lacked experience in developing police units for national law enforcement.³⁸

In September 2005, ISAF expanded its operational area to western Afghanistan, in July 2006 to southern Afghanistan, and in October 2006 to eastern Afghanistan. During this period, the overall focus of training for the Afghan police shifted from local law enforcement to developing paramilitary units capable of supporting the fight against the Taliban within the framework of the American counterinsurgency doctrine.³⁹ Consequently, ANDSF became a tool to seize and hold territory, enabling the expansion of the Afghan central government's authority beyond Kabul.

With the expansion of ISAF to the entirety of Afghanistan, five regional NATO commands were established, each responsible for training and cooperation with ANDSF units. As the ISAF regional commands were under the authority of five different NATO countries, capacity-building efforts following the basic training in Kabul remained uncoordinated. It was first when the US took over responsibility for ISAF in 2007, and the roles of ISAF Commander and Commander of US Forces in Afghanistan were merged in 2008 (including the special operations units under OEF), that the ISAF Joint Command was established in 2009 to coordinate training efforts between Kabul and ISAF's regional commands. Additionally, the merger of Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A) and NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan (NTM-A) in February 2010 led to the creation of organisational accountability for capacity-building.⁴⁰

2006–11: Counterinsurgency under the International Security Assistance Force

The establishment of CSTC-A in 2006 meant that military capacity building – focused on training in Kabul together with unit training and operational cooperation in the regions – could be coordinated.⁴¹ The consolidation of capacity-building efforts under American command coincided with intensified combat against the Taliban, which impacted how the ANDSF was developed. To support ISAF's operational patterns, Afghan military and police units were educated, equipped and trained to reclaim and hold territory with American and NATO support.⁴² Consequently, the development of the Afghan police was less of a priority, and police training focused more on counterinsurgency and less on genuine law enforcement.⁴³

Simultaneously, as the US took responsibility for building the Afghan police, the EU established its own police training mission in Afghanistan (European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan – EUPOL), starting in May 2007. Initially designed to continue the German efforts to build training facilities and police stations,⁴⁴ As the CSTC-A training programmes 'militarised' the police units, EUPOL focused on training the police in the exercise of authority, including investigation, documentation and evidence preservation, albeit with limited effect.⁴⁵ The tension between training the Afghan police in actual policing skills while the US and ISAF prioritised forces for counterinsurgency was difficult and created conflicts between

EUPOL and CSTC-A.⁴⁶ By 2010, a functional collaboration was established, where CSTC-A/NTM-A handled training and advising in the districts, while EUPOL focused on building the Ministry of the Interior and specialised police training in Kabul.⁴⁷

Despite CSTC-A coordinating ANDSF capacity building from 2007 onward, challenges persisted in the interaction among the various NATO countries' numerous initiatives aimed at Afghan ministries, staffs, schools and units.⁴⁸ At the Strasbourg-Kehl Summit in April 2009, NATO therefore decided to establish a coordinated training mission in Afghanistan, leading to the formation of NTM-A in November of the same year. By February 2010, NTM-A became an integrated partner organisation to CSTC-A. The division of labour between the offices responsible for building the Afghan police and army within CSTC-A/NTM-A, coupled with a lack of comprehensive responsibility for the tactical deployment of ANDSF across different ISAF commands, meant that coordination continued to be a major problem.⁴⁹ It was not until Obama's troop surge in the spring of 2010 and the announced exit date in 2014 that ANDSF training was seriously prioritised. However, efforts were primarily directed towards enabling the retention of forward-operating bases as ISAF units withdrew from the territory they had captured.⁵⁰

Much of ANDSF's capacity building was located within the integrated training teams that were to accompany Afghan units from training in garrison, through preparation for operations, and during tactical deployment. The US set up its own *Embedded Training Teams*, while NATO established *Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams* (OMLT).⁵¹ Ideally, the NATO OMLT would live alongside and follow ANDSF units just as the American training teams did.⁵² However, few contributing nations were willing to establish OMLTs, often citing high security demands for their soldiers during deployment. Consequently, very few OMLTs lived, trained and operated alongside ANDSF units. An ISAF assessment from March 2011 revealed that only 44 out of 144 Afghan *kandaks* (military infantry units of battalion size, approximately 500 soldiers) were trained and advised by integrated training teams.⁵³

Before the withdrawal of ISAF forces from 2011 to 2014, a principle was introduced whereby the ANDSF would assume greater ownership of security provision, capacity building and security sector reform. During the surge, ANDSF had initiated and conducted its own operations to a limited extent, often without significant success and typically with US guidance and/or support. The Afghans had yet to develop the necessary competencies or experience to independently plan for the equipment, training and deployment of their own units. At a NATO summit in Chicago in May 2012, it was therefore decided to establish the RSM, which was to focus on training the Afghan ministries, higher military personnel and educational institutions, enabling Afghanistan to manage their own security, from the recruitment of soldiers to supporting their deployment.⁵⁴ The decision to create RSM also reflected the interest in NATO and among many contributing nations to reduce troop numbers in Afghanistan following Obama's exit strategy.

2011–21: Transition, exit strategy and the Resolute Support Mission

The tactical focus on al-Qaeda and the Taliban had dominated capacity-building efforts since the US enhanced the tactical skills of small units in 2002. Over the next ten years, ISAF similarly prioritised the tactical deployment of ANDSF companies and *kandaks* through joint operations and integrated training teams.⁵⁵ As the withdrawal of ISAF forces began in 2011, security responsibilities and the fight against the Taliban were gradually handed over to Afghan units. This transfer occurred despite evaluation reports generally concluding that ANDSF lacked the necessary training levels, required equipment and essential capabilities in intelligence, logistics and medical support to take over the counterinsurgency operations.⁵⁶ Due to challenges related to equipment and personnel in combat support and logistics, ANDSF could only maintain the territory captured by ISAF as long as the Americans supported this effort. Stripped of American air support, intelligence and resupply, ANDSF was essentially unable to operate effectively outside of Kabul.⁵⁷ As a consequence of ANDSF's inability to assume security responsibilities, the ISAF training increasingly focused on combat against the Taliban rather than building ANDSF's capacity to develop its own units and provide security independently.⁵⁸ Simultaneously, as ISAF transferred security responsibilities to ANDSF in remote districts, the basic training programmes in Kabul's training centres were shortened in favour of training the ISAF units that were to be replaced.⁵⁹ This resulted in further emphasis on tactical terrain retention rather than training specialists to provide their own combat support, intelligence and logistics.⁶⁰

The transition from ISAF to the RSM marked the most significant change in the shifting priorities for ANDSF capacity building and must be viewed in the context of two factors. First, Afghanistan had taken over security responsibility in all provinces; and second, NATO's contributing nations were less willing to fill advisory positions for tactical units and in the NATO OMLT due to increasing attacks on NATO forces from Afghan soldiers and police recruited by the Taliban.⁶¹

Beginning in January 2015, the focus of ANDSF capacity building shifted to the ministerial level, emphasising institution building, force generation and force development.⁶² The Afghan authorities were expected to manage force deployment themselves. This represented the first time that capacity building was centred on training Afghans to develop their own security sector. More specifically, this meant that the vast majority of NATO troops left units in Afghan brigade and battalion headquarters in favour of a smaller number of staff officers who took advisory positions in the Afghan defence and interior ministries, as well as at the central training facilities that had been established in Kabul since 2002. In other words, full-time advisers at tactical and operational headquarters were suddenly replaced by contact and visiting teams deployed from Kabul as deemed necessary and as the security situation allowed.⁶³ Consequently, the responsibility for maintaining security while simultaneously combating the Taliban in the provincial districts was transferred to ANDSF, despite ISAF's failure to accomplish this security task over more than a decade and ANDSF not being ready to take on this responsibility.

When the Taliban seized Kunduz in northern Afghanistan in September 2015, demonstrating the strength and will to control major cities, the inability of the Afghan central government to manage security responsibilities and develop its own security forces became starkly evident. Up until the 2020 peace agreement with the Taliban, the primary efforts were directed at creating a favourable negotiating position rather than strengthening the independent Afghan security sector. Due to an ineffective and fragmented Afghan unity government, RSM never succeeded in creating the conditions for ANDSF to provide security independently.⁶⁴ When the US withdrew all support in April 2021, ANDSF collapsed within a matter of months.

ANDSF units never achieved the US Department of Defense's objective regarding sustainability and remained dependent on direct American military support on the battlefield. Furthermore, ANDSF relied on American leadership, logistics, resource management, payroll systems, equipment procurement and support for equipment maintenance.⁶⁵ As the withdrawal progressed, the ANDSF bases could not be supplied as well as previously, they lost control over their equipment, salaries were no longer paid out as previously, procurement ceased as they lacked experience with the processes behind it, and military equipment and technology could no longer be maintained or kept operational as before.⁶⁶ This was particularly detrimental for the Afghan Air Force (AAF), which resulted in the vast majority of AAF combat aircraft and helicopters being grounded instead of supporting the army and other branches.⁶⁷ A portion of the AAF technical personnel and mechanics were American contractors, and when they were withdrawn alongside US troops, the capacity to keep combat aircraft and helicopters operational disappeared.⁶⁸

At President Ghani's directive, ANDSF also spread its units thinly across the country. ANDSF covered most of the territory via checkpoints, small bases and patrol bases, which largely isolated the units and complicated logistics and the delivery of reinforcements to points of conflict. The Taliban exploited this by concentrating attacks on infrastructure, further isolating the ANDSF units and resulting in the collapse of the ANDSF logistical system. This also made it impossible for ANDSF to reinforce and replace worn-out units. By choosing this defensive approach, Ghani and the ANDSF gave the Taliban the offensive initiative, which allowed for the encirclement of combat units and the seizure of strategic nodes, such as border crossings and supply routes, as well as enabling the Taliban to besiege and eventually capture provincial capitals. This weakened ANDSF's logistics and removed manoeuvrability across the country.⁶⁹

The American air support for ANDSF had already been reduced following the 2020 peace agreement with the Taliban, leading to a rapid Taliban takeover of rural areas. The lack of air support meant that ANDSF's defensive military advantage disappeared, along with their ability to hold and recapture lost territory. The withdrawal also left the AAF without mentors and logistical installations. The AAF was not slated to be self-sufficient until at least 2030, meaning that ground units could not receive air support, and resupply in remote areas via AAF transport aircraft became impossible.

The greatest challenges facing the military capacity building

The overarching challenge for military capacity building was the absence of a coordinated strategy, compounded by the frequent changes made to the objectives and priorities over the 20-year engagement. When the United States commenced the ANDSF capacity building in 2003, it did so without any well-defined plan for SSR in Afghanistan.⁷⁰ Consequently, there was a lack of both a long-term objective for ANDSF capacity building and the frameworks necessary to ensure Afghan ownership of its own security sectors. The Afghan political leadership (under Karzai, Ghani and the national unity government) played a significant role in this regard, as factors such as factionalism, a lack of legitimacy and influence, nepotism and corruption fundamentally rendered the central government ineffective and lacking authority outside its narrow circle of loyalists.⁷¹

The issue concerning NATO's efforts was that the numerous adjustments to troop numbers and the ANDSF's operational tasks were driven by short-term objectives in Washington rather than actual needs in Afghanistan. The many organisational shifts in capacity building, varying focuses and lack of Afghan ownership were significant reasons why ANDSF units were unable to withstand the Taliban when the US withdrew in 2021.⁷² Developing the military capacity of the ANDSF primarily concentrated on the training and equipping of units rather than developing local capacities to manage security post-withdrawal. This resulted in a neglect of the competencies required to develop their own SSR strategies, as well as the military capabilities and skills necessary to plan, conduct and fight a coherent campaign against an adversary that had grown stronger and harder during the 20 years of US and NATO presence.⁷³

Short-term objectives prevented local anchoring and Afghan ownership

Despite numerous political agreements regarding locally anchored and coherent SSR, changing political priorities in Washington – rather than long-term objectives for Afghanistan – dominated the establishment of the ANDSF.⁷⁴ Military capacity building over two decades prioritised political success stories over the Afghan ability to ensure its own security. A short-term focus on quantity rather than long-term emphasis on quality became the prevailing theme in the ANDSF development. Over the years, military capacity building was therefore driven more by troop numbers and less by the military competencies of the units involved. Initially, the SSR programme aimed to establish, train and equip 70,000 soldiers for the Afghan army and 62,000 police officers.⁷⁵ From 2003 to 2006, the ANDSF training was directed towards creating security in and around Kabul and equipping light infantry units for security tasks. Before and during the presidential and parliamentary elections, the deprioritisation of long-term capacity building in favour of political success stories in Kabul and Washington became evident. To expand the central government's authority and legitimacy to provinces and districts outside Kabul ahead of the 2004 presidential election, the establishment and rollout of the corps structure for the Afghan army were expedited. This shift replaced the original

capacity-based sequencing with the urgent need for the deployment of all four Afghan land military corps headquarters outside Kabul.⁷⁶ The lack of Afghan ownership and competence in formulating their own capacity development strategies, as well as planning the deployment of the ANDSF, was thus a defining characteristic from the outset. Another example of prioritising political objectives was the focus on troop numbers rather than competencies ahead of the 2009 presidential election. As the United States sought to maximise the visibility of Afghan security forces, the basic training of police cadets was reduced from eight to three weeks.⁷⁷ This resulted in hastily trained police officers being unable to fulfil their policing duties or garner support for the central government in Kabul.⁷⁸ Generally, the Afghan presidential and parliamentary elections posed challenges for the development of the Afghan police, as training efforts were primarily redirected towards creating security before and during the elections.⁷⁹

In 2007, in collaboration with the US, the Afghan central government decided to increase the target strength for the Afghan army from 80,000 to 122,000. Simultaneously, army units were transformed from light infantry into regular brigades, capable of conducting independent operations with their own combat support and logistical units.⁸⁰ During the surge in 2010, ANDSF units were trained to assume security responsibilities as the ISAF withdrew from conquered territories. This led to yet another increase in troop numbers, prioritising quantity over quality, as the size of the ANDSF was deemed the crucial criterion for the withdrawal of additional American troops after just 18 months.⁸¹ To begin the handover of security responsibilities from 2011 onwards and to manage security independently after 2014, the ANDSF troop strength was increased from 220,000 to 352,000 within just four years.⁸²

Recruitment, limited basic training and rapid unit deployment became the priorities for ISAF capacity building from 2009 to 2014. This ‘train, equip and deploy’ approach was thus dictated by the need for quick results, sidelining the most fundamental principles of long-term capacity building within the SSR framework.⁸³ As a result, the implementation of equipment and the enhancement of unit combat capabilities were focused on combat units rather than specialties, such as intelligence, command support and logistics.⁸⁴

A consequence of the ‘train, equip and deploy’ mindset and the focus on troop numbers as a benchmark for success was that Afghan authorities were not educated to take responsibility for their own security sector. The development of the competencies needed for security self-sufficiency was lacking at all levels, from strategy development in the ministries in Kabul to operational planning at the Afghan corps headquarters and police stations in provincial districts. The US and NATO micro-managed everything, from the procurement and implementation of equipment to the recruitment and training of personnel for deployment in operational units.⁸⁵

In addition to the lack of prioritisation by the US and NATO, a critical reason was that successive governments since 2004 had filled positions in the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Defence with loyalists and client networks rather than competent officials knowledgeable about strategy development in the security sector.⁸⁶ The officials and senior officers who NATO and the US had trained and

collaborated with were often replaced in favour of loyalists who, fearing reprisals, withheld information regarding the true state of the ANDSF from the government.⁸⁷

Despite capacity building under the RSM from 2015 focusing specifically on ministerial authorities, training institutions and the ANDSF senior staff and headquarters, no organisational structure prioritising competence and decentralised responsibility was ever established. After 12 years of fragmented capacity building, overall responsibility for security was transferred to the Afghan government in late 2014. With Ashraf Ghani in the presidential palace, the security sector became centralised, as Ghani promoted and appointed loyalists rather than delegating responsibility to the officials and officers who had worked alongside ISAF and the United States.⁸⁸ Particularly, the management of contracts for procurement of ANDSF equipment and maintenance services became centralised to favour Ghani's own economic and political power, often resulting in units lacking ammunition and fuel.⁸⁹ Moreover, the central administration intervened in the appointment of ANDSF leaders, whereby relationships rather than competencies determined who became corps and brigade commanders and police chiefs.⁹⁰ This rotation and replacement of leadership led to factions within the ANDSF between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns, affecting the morale and discipline within the units.⁹¹ As the US and NATO increasingly transferred responsibility to the ministries of interior and defence in Kabul from 2014 onwards, military competencies within the authorities and military staffs eroded as a consequence of internal political power struggles in Afghanistan.

Particularly under the RSM, the security sector became centralised and marked by nepotism and political power struggles. A national strategy for the takeover of SSR responsibilities and the capacity building of the ANDSF from the US and NATO was never developed. Following the Doha Agreement with the Taliban, the ANDSF leadership and the Afghan government failed to devise a national security strategy that could prevent the Taliban's takeover of power on the ground. Similarly, expecting that the United States would remain in Afghanistan, and as a result of groupthink within the government, the necessary plans for the development of the ANDSF were never developed.⁹² Instead, the Afghan government focused on maintaining US and international engagement in Afghanistan rather than prioritising the development of a functioning security sector. The centralisation and politicisation of the security sector further meant that tactical dispositions were directed from the centre, compelling ANDSF unit commanders to comply with the wishes of the government in Kabul.

The fact that the US and NATO had compensated for the lack of Afghan capabilities and competencies since 2011 meant that the ANDSF never learned to operate independently through the experience of gradually being forced to do so. Since the operational pattern was simultaneously built on American doctrine with massive air support, the Afghan Air Force (AAF) and the Afghan Special Operations Forces assumed a crucial role after the transfer of security responsibilities. Both units were generally well-equipped and trained but were increasingly used to support the tactical retention of key terrain as opposed to taking the initiative and thereby confronting the Taliban militarily.⁹³ An example of this is the retention

of the numerous checkpoints across Afghanistan, which President Ghani refused to abandon in 2018. This, despite the fact that defending these checkpoints posed a military challenge, and the many civilian casualties resulting from their retention hurt the government's legitimacy in local areas.⁹⁴ This also spread the Afghan army's military capability over vast distances, and simultaneously the logistical capacity, the Afghan Air Force and the Special Operations Forces were worn down by supporting the many defensive positions. This arrangement exemplifies how the Afghan government and the Ministry of Defence possessed neither the competencies nor the willingness to develop a long-term plan for assuming security responsibilities with their own military capacities, instead uncritically adopting the American counterinsurgency doctrine without consideration for their own capabilities.

Capacity building supported NATO and US – not Afghanistan

A significant reason why the Taliban were able to seize power within a few months was that military capacity building was conducted without grounding in local political circumstances, traditions and culture.⁹⁵ Rather than implementing SSR focused on Afghan political and military prerequisites, the ANDSF was developed over 20 years to address security challenges in the same manner as NATO and the US. Despite political rhetoric about Afghan ownership and an understanding of cultural and local conditions, two factors predominated the military capacity building. Firstly, the ANDSF was constructed as a replica of the organisational structure, doctrine and equipment of the US Army, which Afghanistan had neither the personnel nor infrastructure to support.⁹⁶ Secondly, the capacity building and the pace of the transfer of security responsibility were dictated by domestic politics in Washington, rather than the actual needs in Afghanistan and the ANDSF's capabilities. Both factors were exacerbated by weak Afghan governments with a low degree of political leverage outside of the government offices. The ANDSF remained dependent on the United States and belatedly prioritised legitimate authority in the provincial districts following the transfer of security responsibility in 2015. Consequently, the government and ANDSF both collapsed when the US reached an agreement with the Taliban and withdrew its forces in September 2021.

The organisational structure and military doctrines of the US Defence were from the outset models for the development of Afghan ministries, military training institutions, as well as ANDSF headquarters and units. When the US consolidated responsibility for building both the Afghan Army and Afghan Police in April 2005, the establishment of ANDSF units and command structures began as a copy of the US Army, employing a decentralised management practice.⁹⁷ This management practice bore no resemblance to Afghan culture and tradition, which was more top-down and based on personal networks and long-standing relationships rather than on transient personnel with newly acquired competencies.⁹⁸ Secondly, the ANDSF's inability to maintain security was continuously addressed through intensive tactical support rather than through training and advising Afghan authorities, who were later to assume responsibility for security.⁹⁹

During the surge in the spring of 2010, operational patterns were dictated by ISAF, while the ANDSF played a less prominent role in the planning and execution of tactical deployments.¹⁰⁰

Afghan operations were usually planned in the same way that NATO would conduct them, and deficiencies in logistics and combat support were filled by ISAF units and capabilities.¹⁰¹ The critical dependency was on American air support and assistance to the AAF. When the US withdrew its support for the AAF, the ability to maintain the ANDSF's outer checkpoints and bases against Taliban pressure evaporated, as they could neither receive air support from US aircraft nor be supplied with AAF helicopters. ISAF and the US had transferred an operational pattern built around the massive utilisation of American air support. As security responsibility was transferred to the ANDSF, Afghan units primarily accessed this capability through the advisers training alongside them. Following the agreement with the Taliban in February 2020, air support was reduced, resulting in the ANDSF units losing their ability to reclaim and hold territory.¹⁰² The dependence on American air support and logistics meant that the ANDSF could neither plan nor support its own operations after assuming security responsibility in 2015.¹⁰³

Beyond the organisational and command structure, management practices were also established as a replica of the US Army. The US introduced its own administrative systems and processes for the Afghan authorities and, due to a lack of qualified Afghan administrators, its micro-managed procurement, implementation, supply and maintenance. Afghan politicians, civil servants, and generals thus lacked insight into the personnel and equipment status of the ANDSF and consequently never learned to prioritise which units should be supported with what and when.¹⁰⁴ When the ANDSF assumed security responsibility in 2015, the management of IT systems for budgeting, procurement, supply and maintenance remained largely in American hands, partly due to a lack of competencies and licensing agreements, but primarily out of American fear that Afghan nepotism and corruption would undermine the ANDSF's combat effectiveness.¹⁰⁵ Following the American withdrawal agreement with the Taliban in 2020, many of the civilian partners responsible for management systems were withdrawn from Afghanistan. As a result, the ANDSF was left without any insight into its own materiel inventory and lost maintenance contracts with private companies, losing with it the ability to support its own security creation.¹⁰⁶

Significant, underlying factors contributing to the inability to manage security independently were the low educational levels, high levels of corruption and the use of political client networks.¹⁰⁷ This resulted in the ANDSF, as an organisation, never achieving the necessary educational and competency levels required to assume the responsibility for its own security. Despite an awareness of the high degree of illiteracy among the Afghan population and an international focus on raising Afghan education levels, efforts to strengthen the existing language skills within Afghan police and military units never materialised. In 2006, RAND, an American think tank, evaluated the establishment of the ANDSF and noted that literacy programmes were rarely targeted at the students, that courses were often cut short by several weeks, and that there were no records of who had completed

and passed them.¹⁰⁸ Recruits often transitioned from a short reading course to basic military or police training, resulting in limited learning outcomes.

In 2009, SIGAR assessed that only 13% of the ANDSF recruits could read and write, which the structured basic training required at educational institutions in Kabul.¹⁰⁹ The lack of literacy skills and absence of formal education meant that the vast majority of basic military and police training had to be conducted through demonstration, which required more time.¹¹⁰ Notwithstanding this premise, training times were continuously shortened to comply with political agreements regarding troop levels. As more technical weapon systems and equipment were procured and integrated into the ANDSF, the demand for highly educated and trained specialists increased.¹¹¹ This resulted in many positions in communication, logistics, intelligence and targeting being difficult to fill with qualified Afghan personnel.¹¹² As a consequence of the considerable educational backlog regarding specialists, the ANDSF was seldom trained in interoperability among its own units and capabilities. On the occasions when the ANDSF was required to conduct operations independently, the US and NATO provided the necessary intelligence, air support, command support and logistics, meaning that the ANDSF never developed the ability to take over security responsibility.¹¹³

In a similar vein, corruption and nepotism significantly contributed to the ANDSF's inability to win the military struggle against the Taliban or to establish the necessary legitimacy within the population to withstand Taliban political influence.¹¹⁴ Despite all SSR strategies in Afghanistan identifying corruption as a significant problem in building security forces, insufficient attention was given to the issue throughout the 20-year period.¹¹⁵ Corruption and nepotism posed immense challenges for personnel and materiel management with respect to military capacity building, as well as for establishing the required cohesion and *esprit de corps* within the units. Materiel and fuel were stolen and sold on the black market, salary payments ended up in the pockets of superiors, and the reported troop levels of units were manipulated so that salary funds could be distributed among officers.¹¹⁶ This resulted in a considerable number of 'ghost soldiers' in the ANDSF personnel records, where thousands of soldiers appeared on the payroll without existing in the units.¹¹⁷ The withholding of salary payments to the ANDSF units that were actually staffed further exacerbated corruption. To compensate for the lack of wages, local populations increasingly fell victim to theft and kidnapping, were extorted for fees at checkpoints, or were forced to pay for protection.¹¹⁸ All of this contributed significantly to the perception of the ANDSF as being more of a security problem than a solution, leading the ordinary local Afghan to support the Taliban in the provincial districts.¹¹⁹

Overall, the myriad local conditions resulted in the ANDSF losing momentum in its efforts against the Taliban from January 2015. Due to a lack of coordination and upward reporting within the system, the challenges faced by units and in provincial districts were rarely addressed. This was because the command chain through the ANDSF to the ministries in Kabul was ineffective, resulting in the US and NATO receiving incorrect or delayed information regarding the actual conditions within the units through the Afghan ministries of the interior and defence.

Consequently, it was impossible for NATO advisers at RSM to address the challenges of recruitment, training and corruption before it was too late. This was exacerbated by the fact that ISAF had focused on units and tactical deployments, while RSM concentrated on overarching ministerial structures, resulting in a lack of connection between the two.¹²⁰ Only six months after the transfer of security responsibility, it had become evident that the ANDSF could not manage its own security when the Afghan Army's 215th Corps was overrun by the Taliban in Helmand Province during the summer of 2015.¹²¹ From April 2015 until the summer of 2017, the Taliban took control of 12 of the 14 districts in Helmand Province. Due to the absence of advisers with operational and tactical units, the inadequate training of soldiers and corruption was not addressed in time. The 215th Corps subsequently had to be restructured, and 40% of its military leaders were replaced through US intervention.¹²² Subsequently, the United States chose to intensify training and advising at the tactical headquarters, and RSM established two special units to support the 215th and 203rd Corps in Helmand and Paktika Provinces in southeastern Afghanistan, near the border with Pakistan. The US established Task Force Anvil, comprising 300 training personnel from the US Marine Corps, who provided the fundamental retraining of all units in the 215th Corps from April 2017, including support in planning operations to regain control over the provincial districts in Helmand.¹²³

While the US took the lead in training and advising ANDSF units in Helmand and Paktika, NATO continued to advise ministries, training facilities and higher commands in Kabul. However, as the security situation gradually worsened while the Taliban grew stronger, capacity building was focused within the Afghan camps due to national constraints and domestic political prioritisation of the safety of deployed NATO soldiers. This resulted in the disappearance of training and advising of smaller units and police districts, as the ANDSF could not provide security. From 2018 onwards, training and advising primarily occurred through rapid response teams, which, within the framework of the 'fly-and-advise' metaphor, trained only those ANDSF units not engaged in direct combat with the Taliban. As soon as the Taliban intensified their attacks on Afghan bases and checkpoints, the NATO training teams withdrew from the Afghan security forces. This approach rendered real military training and advising of the combat-ready ANDSF units impossible, although they continued to receive support from American intelligence, air support and logistics.¹²⁴

Fragmented responsibility and inadequate coordination

A significant challenge in military capacity building was the lack of continuity in the organisational framework and coherence within and between the contributing nations' efforts. At no point did long-term goals govern military capacity building, resulting in various national and unit-specific characteristics often influencing the operations. Consequently, the military capacity building of the ANDSF never evolved into the cohesive international effort envisaged in political agreements and strategies. National priorities in training initiatives, a lack of skills and experience

in capacity building, as well as national restrictions and short deployment periods for NATO advisers all negatively impacted the coherence of the international effort.¹²⁵

Up until 2009, the establishment of the ANDSF was primarily carried out by American units present in Afghanistan.¹²⁶ In 2002, the ANDSF was trained by American special operations forces under OEF, which focused on small unit tactics and the personal combat skills of the soldiers. In the spring of 2003, the United States transferred responsibility for the task to the US Army while simultaneously establishing Task Force Phoenix to promote coherence in the capacity building from small units to corps structures.¹²⁷ As a consequence of the Iraq War, capacity building was handed over to the US National Guard in late 2003, which subsequently took over the training of the ANDSF under Task Force Phoenix until 2009, coinciding with the establishment of the CSTC-A in 2006. From 2003 to 2009, eight different US National Guard units were responsible for ANDSF capacity building.¹²⁸

Without any long-term plan for capacity building, overarching coordination or systematic knowledge transfer between training initiatives, Afghan units were developed over six years as a mirror image of the American units that, at varying intervals, were tasked with educating, training and advising. During the same period, the establishment and advisory support for the Afghan Ministry of Defence in Kabul were provided by a private military security company contracted by the US Department of Defense. Concurrently, the US Department of State initiated its own training programme for experienced Afghan police officers through DynCorp, a private security company.¹²⁹ This programme focused on building capacity for local police courses in Afghan districts through a so-called 'train-the-trainer' principle, which was not coordinated with the earlier German capacity building under the SSR framework. From 2002 to 2009, the ANDSF capacity building thus resembled a patchwork of uncoordinated initiatives divided between the US and Germany, the US Departments of State and Defense, OEF and ISAF, military units and private security firms, as well as between the US Army and the American National Guard. There was, therefore, no coordination between training initiatives, central reporting to Kabul, or any long-term focused effort within the SSR framework based on Afghan ownership and pace.

National priorities and limitations influenced training after the ANDSF units had completed their basic training in Kabul.¹³⁰ Several contributing nations formulated political objectives for the training of ANDSF units to support their own forces in their operational areas, and they established national success criteria for evaluating the training efforts.¹³¹ Consequently, the training and advising of the ANDSF were often driven by politically measurable criteria, such as specific troop numbers, a timeframe for (or capacity to assume) security in a specific geographic area.¹³² National benchmarks intensified in line with the Obama exit strategy, as contributing nations viewed a seemingly well-functioning ANDSF unit as the criterion for withdrawing their own troops. From 2011 until 2015, domestic political pressure to transfer security responsibility to the Afghans became a driving force

for both security creation and military capacity building in the operational areas of the contributing nations.¹³³

Although NATO had an overarching concept for training and advising, the respective nations' contributions generally had the autonomy to determine how, for what purpose, and where military training and advising of Afghan units occurred.¹³⁴ This reinforced national priorities in training, which became more directly focused on individual areas of operations and responsibility. At several of the ISAF district headquarters and the so-called Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), individual nations' stabilisation projects guided the establishment and deployment of the ANDSF (see also chapter on civilian capacity building).¹³⁵

NATO units in Afghanistan lacked competent advisers and experienced staff officers across a range of issues, including advisers on stabilisation and military capacity building. As few countries had specialist units for training and advising, contributions to capacity building were often assembled from small units from various branches, supplemented by a limited number of experienced personnel.¹³⁶ In the vast majority of cases, positions within military capacity building were filled by individuals deployed for shorter periods without prior mission-specific functional training.¹³⁷ The importance of local knowledge and cultural understanding is a recurring theme in the evaluations from deployed advisers and trainers.¹³⁸ This paints a picture of inadequate training in cultural elements that did not focus on the specific traditions and social structures of the mission area.¹³⁹ This lack of competencies, particularly local knowledge, meant that the uncoordinated efforts of a few generalists could not facilitate Afghan ownership of the work that the Afghan military and police units had to take care of.¹⁴⁰ In April 2016, SIGAR and the United States Institute of Peace conducted a 'lessons learned' conference on capacity building in Afghanistan, where the absence of local and cultural anchoring was deemed the most significant challenge to developing ANDSF military competencies.¹⁴¹

In addition to lacking competencies and local understanding, many NATO positions within training and advising often remained unfilled due to national priorities and a lack of qualified personnel for continuous staffing. A report from May 2011 indicated that over half of the NTM-A trainer and adviser positions were vacant, and many of those deployed lacked the necessary skills or experience in military capacity building.¹⁴² Similarly, the EU faced challenges in staffing trainer and adviser positions in the EUPOL police training mission, as many European countries were reluctant to commit to sustained deployments.¹⁴³ Furthermore, the reality of the police and military professional competencies required for building the ANDSF was exacerbated by the fact that trainers and advisers were often deployed for short periods.¹⁴⁴ As national contributions handled the daily advising of ANDSF units within their respective areas of operations and responsibility, Afghan unit commanders frequently encountered a new partner every six months.¹⁴⁵ The continuity of training initiatives was further undermined by the rotation of various Afghan units among ISAF units, where each national contingent commander imposed their own priorities on the effort. Within a 12-month period, an Afghan unit or police chief could face three to four different partners, each with

distinct priorities for training efforts. This led to a loss of organisational memory and continuity in capacity building, as well as the opportunity to prioritise and focus long-term on developing the ANDSF capacity to provide its own security and planning.¹⁴⁶

As ISAF's operational areas expanded in 2006, the number of contributing nations also increased, including countries that were not NATO members. Because the international support for the mission was deemed more significant than capacity-building competencies, ISAF and RSM welcomed all contributions. This increased the number of national initiatives as well as the variety of different units with national restrictions on deployment and areas of operations.¹⁴⁷ In relation to the overall military effort in Afghanistan, national restrictions represented one of the most significant challenges to success.¹⁴⁸ By 2009, over half of the trainers deployed to NTM-A faced national restrictions that complicated daily advising outside NATO bases and rendered advising during operations impossible.¹⁴⁹ This hampered NATO's ability to strengthen the military competencies of Afghan units and the collaboration between them. Following the transfer of security responsibility to the ANDSF and the establishment of RSM in 2015, the extent of national restrictions increased as many contributing countries did not deploy their own security units to protect NATO advisers outside secured bases. Consequently, the RSM training efforts were dictated by the security situation in Kabul.¹⁵⁰ From 2015 onwards, advising primarily occurred within secured areas, limiting the training of the ANDSF during operations. To compensate for this, US units specialising in training, advising and support were deployed to Afghanistan in 2018 to enhance the ANDSF's operational and tactical capabilities.¹⁵¹

National restrictions and a lack of experienced OMLT officers meant that contributing nations frequently bid for the few but critical staff positions related to capacity building at ISAF headquarters and various initiatives (e.g., CSTC-A, NTM-A). Consequently, the NATO staffs and headquarters responsible for ANDSF capacity building often resembled a patchwork of nationalities that spent most of their time working to find common direction and meaning in their tasks, which were often only framed by the numerous national guidelines and individuals' experiences.¹⁵² Instead of significantly contributing more staff officers to the same unit or headquarters, the contributions made by individual nations were often dispersed to gain insight and influence within ISAF or goodwill in NATO and the US.¹⁵³ This fragmented deployment further reinforced the overall impression that trainers and advisers were scattered throughout the mission area, even though some contributing countries deployed and trained them as units.¹⁵⁴

Conclusion

This chapter has described a significant gap between the ideals underpinning the political agreements on capacity building (i.e., sustainability, local ownership and coherence) and how the capacity-building efforts evolved over the 20-year period.

NATO's efforts, both under ISAF and RSM, suffered from precisely the opposite of the declared intentions:

- Short-termism and the need for rapid results, including quantitative and often shifting success criteria for measuring progress.
- The ANDSF being supportive of the US and NATO, rather than the other way around.
- A fragmented approach characterised by national restrictions and a lack of competence.

The chapter has also described how the withdrawal of ISAF forces began in 2011, despite evaluation reports concluding that the ANDSF did *not* possess the necessary training levels, required materiel or essential capabilities in intelligence, logistics and medical services to take over counterinsurgency operations.

Clearly, the military capacity building intended to enable the ANDSF to ensure the country's security, including resisting the Taliban, was unsuccessful due to the following factors:

Firstly, until the initiation of RSM in 2015, capacity building was primarily defined by American priorities and the War on Terror: During the years 2003–06, the ANDSF training focused on security provision in and around Kabul, while Americans were engaged in combat throughout Afghanistan. As the security situation in Afghanistan worsened, capacity-building efforts from 2006 centred on improving the ability to manage insurgencies, as opposed to a more focused approach to building the security institutions. The assembly of capacity-building efforts under American command coincided with the intensified fight against the Taliban, which influenced how the ANDSF was developed. During President Obama's surge in the spring of 2010, the focus shifted to the tactical deployment of the ANDSF against the Taliban. At this stage, capacity building concentrated on enabling Afghan units to support and replace ISAF forces. Simultaneously, the Afghan National Police (ANP) were also trained and utilised to combat insurgencies or to retain captured territory, rather than to provide law enforcement and protection for the local population. The local populace viewed the ANP as a security challenge, particularly in rural areas and especially after 2009, when the ANP was increasingly trained and employed as a paramilitary force.¹⁵⁵ The American approach to capacity building generally meant that the ANDSF was not developed to plan, conduct or support its own operations. Additionally, the training and deployment of the ANP for counterinsurgency contributed to its perception as an illegitimate police authority outside major Afghan cities.

Secondly, the capacity-building failure persisted throughout all phases of the war due to its short-term focus: At the outset of the war, the Americans concentrated on defeating al-Qaeda; and from 2003, also on the war in Iraq. Moreover, the divided responsibilities for SSR and various national perspectives on capacity building led to efforts that often appeared as a patchwork of uncoordinated approaches among the involved countries, various military units and private security companies. There was neither direct coordination among the initiatives, central

reporting, nor a focused effort within the SSR framework. An unclear division of responsibilities and tasks among NATO, the US and other contributing nations lay behind many of the challenges. This was compounded by the individual countries' restrictions on the deployment of their units, low levels of competence and training in advising and training, a lack of local knowledge and experience among deployed trainers and advisers, the length of the respective countries' deployment periods, and uneven rotations among countries. Altogether, this resulted in a lack of continuity, learning, and knowledge sharing among the contributing nations.

Thirdly, one of the main issues was that capacity-building efforts did not foster local ownership or align with Afghan needs. It was first in 2015, with RSM, that capacity building focused on a genuine reform of the Afghan security sector organisations. Despite the low training levels, high levels of corruption and clientelism being widely acknowledged, NATO did not take these conditions into account. Instead, training periods were continually abbreviated to meet the political agreements regarding troop levels made by the involved nations; an emphasis on quantity over quality. The effort was characterised by the gradual sidelining of Afghan needs. Overall, the political focus on state-building in a Western model was decisive for how the US and NATO implemented SSR and subsequently developed the Afghan army and police. Thus, there was a lack of local understanding and genuine Afghan ownership in capacity building, and the vast majority of decisions regarding the Afghan security sectors were made far from Kabul.

Consequently, this chapter has highlighted how RSM assumed an impossible task, as neither the Afghan Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Defence, nor ANDSF authorities were in any way capable of leading the development of their security sectors after 14 years of training. The manner in which capacity building was structured and measured over the years did not account for the fact that the ANDSF had become deeply reliant on NATO and the US, particularly on American leadership, fire support and logistics. Attempt was made to shape the ANDSF according to the organisation, doctrine and materiel of the American army, which Afghanistan's socio-economic conditions could not support. The capacity-building efforts and the pace of the transfer of security responsibility were driven by American interests rather than the ANDSF competence levels. When the US withdrew its advisers and, in particular, air support in mid-2021, the ANDSF collapsed within a matter of weeks.

Although there were evaluations highlighting these problems, ongoing monitoring and evaluation of progress lacked relevant benchmarks. Progress was measured using input factors such as expenditure and output factors (e.g., the number of soldiers completing the brief training programme). Although the work controlling logistics, equipment and finances was very challenging and exacerbated corruption, undermining factors (e.g., poor leadership, legitimacy issues and corruption) were not taken seriously enough. SSR in Afghanistan developed capacities but did so without considering the quality or Afghanistan's ability to support them with financing and infrastructure. This created an enormous dependency on external donors for training and equipping, but also for paying salaries to the increasing number of defence and security forces.¹⁵⁶

Notes

- 1 Given the interest in ANDSF capacity building expressed in the terms of reference for the inquiry report that served as the basis for this book, we focus primarily on *military* capacity development and less on the establishment of the Afghan National Police.
- 2 Resolution, UN Security Council, 'Resolution 1386', 20 December 2001; Resolution, UN Security Council, 'Resolution 1401', 28 March 2002; Resolution, UN Security Council, 'Resolution 2189', 12 December 2014.
- 3 Resolution, UN Security Council, 'Resolution 1368', 12 September 2001.
- 4 Resolution, UN Security Council, 'Resolution 1378', 14 November 2001.
- 5 Declaration, UN Security Council, 'Letter dated 5 December 2001 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council', 5 December 2001, annex I.
- 6 Declaration, London Conference on Afghanistan, 'The Afghanistan Compact: Building on Success', 1 February 2006, annex 1.
- 7 Resolution, UNSC, 'Resolution 1386', annex 1, point 2.
- 8 Resolution, UN Security Council, 'Resolution 1510', 13 October 2003.
- 9 Resolution, UN Security Council, 'Resolution 1776', 19 September 2007, p. 3.
- 10 SIGAR, *Police in conflict: Lessons from the U.S. experience in Afghanistan*, December 2022, p. 108; Theo Farrell (2017), *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan 2001–2014*, Vintage, p. 203.
- 11 Resolution, UNSC, 'Resolution 2189'.
- 12 Declaration, NATO, 'North Atlantic Council Ministerial Statement on Afghanistan', 14 April 2021.
- 13 Nicole Ball (2010), 'The evolution of the security sector reform agenda', in Marc Sedra (ed.), *The Future of Security Sector Reform*, The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), p. 29.
- 14 SSR concerns the transformation of the actors within the security system, their roles, responsibilities and actions across four primary areas: (1) The development of an institutionalised framework for security provision that integrates security and development policies and includes all of the relevant actors within the system. (2) Strengthening of the governance and oversight of security institutions. (3) Building professional defence and security forces that are held accountable to civilian authorities. (4) Promoting a sustainable legal and security system. Ball, 'The evolution', pp. 35–36.
- 15 Paul Jackson (2011), 'Security sector reform and state building', *Third World Quarterly* 32(10), 1804.
- 16 As a concept and process, SSR aligns with liberal peacebuilding by promoting the establishment of democratic principles, emphasising human rights, and facilitating political and economic reforms. Oliver P. Richmond (2010), 'A genealogy of peace and conflict theory', in Richmond (ed.), *Palgrave Advances in Peacebuilding*, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 22.
- 17 One of the criticisms of SSR, as it has been implemented since the 1990s, is that it has become more of a tool for promoting democracy than for establishing a well-functioning security sector capable of managing internal tensions within states. Consequently, SSR is often associated with the dissemination of Western liberal democratic values, despite the concept originally stemming from the need to create a linkage between security and development. Mark Sedra (2006), 'Security sector reform in Afghanistan: The slide towards expediency', *International Peacekeeping* 13(1), 94; Ball, 'The evolution', p. 34.
- 18 Maria-Louse Clausen and Peter Albrecht (2021), 'Interventions since the Cold War: From statebuilding to stabilization', *International Affairs* 97(4), 1203–1220; Mark Sedra (2010), 'Towards second generation security sector reform', in Sedra (ed.), *The Future of Security Sector Reform*, The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI); Michael Miklaucic (2023), 'State-building 101: Hard lessons from Afghanistan', *Armed Forces & Society* 49(4), 982–988.

- 19 Sedra, 'Towards second generation security', p. 105.
- 20 This timeframe particularly interacts with and is reinforced by the issue of ownership, as external objectives push solutions in a liberal democratic direction while the willingness for continued donor commitment stems from the level of democratisation. Consequently, short-term focus on exit criteria often takes precedence over long-term emphasis on ownership. As a result, the degree of commitment becomes significant for both the long-term focus and local ownership.
- 21 Jackson, 'Security sector reform', p. 1813.
- 22 Peter Albrecht et al. (2010), 'Security sector reform, the European way', in Marc Sedra (ed.), *The Future of Security Sector Reform*, The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), p. 80.
- 23 Miklaucic, 'State-building 101', p. 983.
- 24 Sedra, 'Security sector reform in Afghanistan', p. 94.
- 25 The G8 countries consisted of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the UK and the US.
- 26 Sedra, 'Security sector reform in Afghanistan', p. 96.
- 27 SIGAR, *Divided responsibility: Lessons from U.S. security sector assistance efforts in Afghanistan*, July 2019, p. 70; SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. experience in Afghanistan*, September 2017, p. 88; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark and Ministry of Defence (2013), *Afrapportering 2012: Den danske indsats i Afghanistan*; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark and Ministry of Defence (2010), *Den danske indsats i Helmand 2010: Helmand-planen 2010*.
- 28 SIGAR, *Police in conflict*.
- 29 Albrecht et al., 'the European way', p. 83. The ANDSF were not economically sustainable, as over 80% of their funding came from American donor assistance. Moreover, 85% of the Afghan security sector was financed by donor aid. The ANDSF could not manage responsibilities related to salary payments, logistics and the procurement of equipment without American support. Nisha Biswal et al., 'Afghanistan study group: Final report', USIP, 3 February 2021, p. 36.
- 30 Jackson, 'Security sector reform', p. 1808; Sedra, 'Security sector reform in Afghanistan', p. 95; Albrecht et al., 'the European way', p. 81.
- 31 Albrecht et al., 'the European way', p. 83.
- 32 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 17.
- 33 SIGAR, *Police in conflict*, p. 41.
- 34 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 18; Sedra, 'Security sector reform in Afghanistan', p. 106.
- 35 Hassan Oz, 'Afghanistan: Lessons learnt from 20 years of supporting democracy, development and security', European Parliament, 2 January 2023, p. 43.
- 36 Resolution, UN Security Council, 'The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security', 12 August 2004, p. 6.
- 37 Ali A. Jalali (2016), 'Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces: Mission, challenges, and sustainability', USIP, 20 May 2016 p. 7; Terrence K. Kelly et al. (2011), *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts*, RAND, p. 60; SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 35.
- 38 SIGAR, *Why the Afghan security forces collapsed*, February 2023, pp. 45, 64.
- 39 Jalali, 'mission, challenges, and sustainability', p. 10.
- 40 Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence (2010), *Den danske indsats i Helmand 2010*, p. 16; SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 73.
- 41 SIGAR, *Divided responsibility*, p. 121; Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War*, pp. 203, 280.
- 42 SIGAR, *Police in conflict*, pp. 107–141.
- 43 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 63.

- 44 Jalali, 'mission, challenges, and sustainability', p. 8; European Court of Auditors, 'The EU police mission in Afghanistan: Mixed results', 2015, p. 6.
- 45 Oz, 'Afghanistan: Lessons learnt'; European Court of Auditors, 'The EU police mission'. The police's brutality and extortion led some segments of the population to view the Taliban as liberators. The police were involved in criminal activities, unlawful detention, torture and murder. See SIGAR, *Police in conflict*, p. 143. The police were tasked with establishing checkpoints in rural areas, which were exploited to extort the local population. Although the number of police units was substantial, they lacked sufficient resources or capacities to perform any tasks effectively. Moreover, the police were not subject to oversight, leading police chiefs to behave like local warlords. The absence of investigations into criminal activities or human rights violations committed by the police resulted in widespread animosity towards them among the populace. SIGAR, *Police in conflict*, pp. 2, 115.
- 46 Oz, 'Afghanistan: Lessons learnt', p. 42; SIGAR, *Divided responsibility*, p. 139.
- 47 Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence (2011), *Helmand-planen 2011–2012 samt afrapportering for den danske indsats i Afghanistan i 2010*, p. 29; SIGAR, *Divided responsibility*, p. 139.
- 48 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 120.
- 49 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 46.
- 50 Godal et al., 'En god alliert: Norge i Afghanistan 2001–2014', 6 June 2016, p. 126; SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, pp. 2–3.
- 51 Declaration, Headquarters International Security Assistance Force, 'Partnering directive', 29 August 2009.
- 52 SIGAR, *Divided responsibility*, p. 9.
- 53 [Department of Defense, United States of America \(2011\)](#), *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan and United States Plan for Sustaining the Afghan National Security Forces*, pp. 35–36.
- 54 Declaration, NATO, 'Chicago Summit Declaration', 20 May 2012.
- 55 Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence, *Afrapportering 2012*, p. 18.
- 56 Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence (2011), *Afrapportering for 2011 på Helmandplanen 2011–2012*, p. 3; [Department of Defense, United States of America \(2011\)](#), *Report on Progress*, p. 39.
- 57 The US Air Force served as a 'force multiplier', and its presence abruptly disappeared the night of 29 February 2020. American airstrikes constrained the Taliban's manoeuvrability, hindered major offensives, and weakened their capacity to attack the ANDSF. As air support was reduced and eventually ceased, these advantages disappeared. The ANDSF troops were left without air support, which increased their casualty rates and further weakened their morale and motivation. SIGAR, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: An assessment of the factors that led to its demise*, May 2022, p. 10.
- 58 Jalali, 'mission, challenges, and sustainability', p. 10; SIGAR, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 33.
- 59 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, pp. 96–99.
- 60 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, pp. 3, 14, 44.
- 61 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 53.
- 62 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 38; [NATO \(2022\)](#), *Integral: Transition to Afghan lead (2011–2014)*.
- 63 SIGAR, *Divided responsibility*, p. 25.
- 64 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 17; ICG, 'Afghanistan: The future of the national unity government', 10 April 2017, pp. 13–19.
- 65 SIGAR, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 7.
- 66 SIGAR, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 24.
- 67 SIGAR, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 28.
- 68 SIGAR, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 43.

- 69 SIGAR, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, pp. 19–20.
- 70 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 165.
- 71 Ghani was focused on his own political survival – specifically, avoiding a military coup – and replaced American-trained generals and officers with loyalists. The frequent changes in leadership within the military and police undermined the ANDSF leadership, which further weakened their overall ability to combat the Taliban. SIGAR, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, pp. 16–17.
- 72 The reasons for the lack of Afghan ownership can be debated. The literature and evaluations emphasise different aspects, but usually both: That the projects were perceived as belonging to the Americans/NATO, and thus that the only incentive was economic, as well as the notion that the Afghan political elite lacked either the willingness to be a collaborative partner or the capacity to assume responsibility.
- 73 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 44.
- 74 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 7.
- 75 Jalali, ‘mission, challenges, and sustainability’, p. 8.
- 76 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 50.
- 77 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 94.
- 78 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 100.
- 79 SIGAR, *Divided responsibility*, p. 70; SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 88; Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence, *Afrapportering 2012*; Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence, *Den danske indsats i Helmand 2010*.
- 80 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 40.
- 81 Jalali, ‘mission, challenges, and sustainability’, p. 9.
- 82 Jalali, ‘mission, challenges, and sustainability’, p. 10; SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 70.
- 83 Sedra, ‘Security sector reform in Afghanistan’, p. 109.
- 84 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 40.
- 85 The US attempted to impose Western political and technocratic systems on a society that resolves most of its challenges through informal local systems. Consequently, cultural and social barriers were neither understood nor dismantled. Local actors and individuals exploited the American lack of understanding of Afghan interests, strengthening their own power bases at the expense of political and economic development, as well as the well-being of the population. SIGAR, *What we need to learn: Lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction*, August 2021, p. XI.
- 86 ICG, ‘Afghanistan: The future’; Sedra, ‘Security sector reform in Afghanistan’, pp. 103–105.
- 87 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 21.
- 88 Jalali, ‘mission, challenges, and sustainability’, p. 19; SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 18.
- 89 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 31.
- 90 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 24.
- 91 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 22.
- 92 Jalali, ‘mission, challenges, and sustainability’, p. 19; SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 29.
- 93 Jalali, ‘mission, challenges, and sustainability’, p. 22.
- 94 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 35.
- 95 SIGAR, *What we need to learn*, p. 71.
- 96 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 16.
- 97 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, pp. 14, 60.
- 98 Barnett R. Rubin (2020), *Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press; Thomas J. Barfield (2012), *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton University Press.
- 99 SIGAR, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 29.

- 100 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 84; Ben Anderson (2011), *No Worse Enemy: The Inside Story of the Chaotic Struggle for Afghanistan*, Oneworld Publications, p. 107.
- 101 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 3.
- 102 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 12.
- 103 Jalali, 'mission, challenges, and sustainability', pp. 14, 21.
- 104 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 14.
- 105 SIGAR, *Divided responsibility*, p. 77.
- 106 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 15. The decision to withdraw troops and contractors from Afghanistan was the catalyst for the ANDSF's collapse. The announcement of the American decision to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan significantly undermined the morale of the ANDSF. The ANDSF depended on American troops and air support to avoid significant casualties, a fact that ANDSF personnel and commanders were very aware of. Furthermore, American troops and their commanders assured the troops that salaries would be paid and that units would have access to supplies. The withdrawal meant that the soldiers gradually realised that they would not be receiving their salaries or be supported by Quick Reaction Forces (QRF), even if the situation demanded such support, and US Air Force protection gradually dissipated. SIGAR, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 6.
- 107 Sedra, 'Security sector reform in Afghanistan', p. 105.
- 108 Kelly et al., *Security Force Assistance*, p. 48.
- 109 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 142.
- 110 William B. Caldwell and Nathan K. Finney (2011), 'Security, capacity, and literacy', *Military Review* January–February 2011, 23–27.
- 111 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 154.
- 112 The United States was responsible for the procurement of materiel for the ANDSF, which resulted in the ANDSF never learning the process themselves. Furthermore, the materiel that the US procured for the ANDSF was high-tech and therefore too advanced for the ANDSF to fully utilise or to maintain independently. SIGAR, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 28.
- 113 Jalali, 'mission, challenges, and sustainability', p. 14.
- 114 Jalali, 'mission, challenges, and sustainability', p. 8; Tingsgård, 'Sverige i Afghanistan', p. 80; ICG (2011), 'The insurgency in Afghanistan's heartland', *Asia Report*, 27 June 2011.
- 115 SIGAR, *What we need to learn*, p. 27; *OLFI*, 'Den afghanske hær lider: både på grund af tab og af intern korruption', 25 May 2017.
- 116 Godal et al., 'En god alliert', p. 40.
- 117 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 154.
- 118 Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence (2009), *Den danske indsats i Helmand 2008: Afrapportering 2008*, p. 13; SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 131.
- 119 SIGAR, *Police in conflict*, pp. 38–39.
- 120 SIGAR, *Divided responsibility*, p. 123.
- 121 Andrew Quilty, 'Static war: Helmand after the US Marines' return', *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, 23 April 2020.
- 122 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 111.
- 123 Quilty, 'Static war'.
- 124 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 113.
- 125 The military contributions of the involved nations were defined and constrained by political ambitions. The military contributions of coalition countries were often limited by the types of tasks they could undertake and the types of missions in which they could participate. This created significant coordination challenges. See Louise Riis Andersen (2016), *Afghanistan erfaringsopsamling 2001–2014: Del 1: Internationale erfaringer med samtænkning i Afghanistan*, DIIS, p. 28.

- 126 Jalali, 'mission, challenges, and sustainability', p. 9.
- 127 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 20.
- 128 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 160.
- 129 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 57.
- 130 Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War*, p. 209; Tingsgård, 'Sverige i Afghanistan', p. 62.
- 131 Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence, *Den danske indsats i Helmand 2010*, pp. 30–36.
- 132 Tingsgård, 'Sverige i Afghanistan', p. 19; Godal et al., 'En god alliert', p. 119. The metrics used to measure the development of the ANDSF were largely ineffective. The American methods for assessing the progress of the ANDSF changed four times since 2005, leading to inconsistent approaches and benchmarks. Ultimately, this made it exceedingly difficult to evaluate the ANDSF's capabilities and capacities. SIGAR, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 29.
- 133 Vegard Valther Hansen et al., 'Etter beste evne: om Forsvaret og deres afghanske partnere', NUPI, 2012.
- 134 Godal et al., 'En god alliert', p. 126.
- 135 SIGAR, *Divided responsibility*, p. 118.
- 136 [Ministry of Defence \(2009\)](#), *Forsvarsforlig 2010–2014*, p. 9; SIGAR, *Divided responsibility*, p. 9.
- 137 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 44; Godal et al., 'En god alliert', p. 54; Russel L. Honoré and David V. Boslego (2007), 'Forging provincial reconstruction teams', *Joint Force Quarterly* 44(1), 85–89.
- 138 Sedra, 'Security sector reform in Afghanistan'.
- 139 Royal Danish Defence College, 'Danish Advisory and Training Staff (DATS): Erfaringsopsamling og præsentation', 2012, p. 5; Godal et al., 'En god alliert', p. 9; SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 111.
- 140 Godal et al., 'En god alliert', p. 199.
- 141 SIGAR, *Lessons from the coalition: International experiences from the Afghanistan reconstruction*, 20 April 2016.
- 142 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 51.
- 143 Oz, 'Afghanistan: Lessons learnt', p. 42.
- 144 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 52; Godal et al., 'En god alliert', p. 51.
- 145 Morten Just Brandstrup, 'Jeg håber at kunne "smitte" med god ledelse', *Forsvarsavisen*, May 2016, p. 16.
- 146 SIGAR, *Collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 28.
- 147 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 71.
- 148 [Executive Services Directorate, United States of America \(2008\)](#), *Report on Progress*, p. 7; David P. Auerswald and Stephen M. Saideman (2009), *NATO at War: Understanding the Challenges of Caveats in Afghanistan*, McGill University, p. 2.
- 149 Arthur Ten Cate (2013), 'Invited to see Americans fight? The Dutch participation in allied operations post-9/11', in Niels Bo Poulsen, Kjeld Hald Galster and Søren Nørby (ed.), *Coalition Warfare*; SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, p. 75.
- 150 Søren Lindhardt, 'Truslen flytter med til Kabul', *Forsvarsavisen*, February 2015, p. 6.
- 151 [Department of Defense, United States of America \(2018\)](#), *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*.
- 152 SIGAR, *Afghan security forces collapsed*, p. 64.
- 153 The American goodwill is one of the main conclusions in Godal et al., 'En god alliert'.
- 154 SIGAR, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces*, p. 44.
- 155 The Swedish investigation from 2017 confirms this picture. It states how, during the period 2002–06, security sector reforms did not yield the desired results. Repeated

attempts (initially by Germany, later by the EU) at establishing an Afghan police force were hindered by frequent leadership changes together with challenges related to logistics and recruitment. The international community's efforts to establish an Afghan police force were fragmented. The presence of too many international missions with overlapping mandates complicated coordination. The police began to resemble militias, and the ANP did not enjoy the trust of the population. The ANP became militarised and could therefore no longer be classified as a civilian entity, which also created a rift between the ANP and the judiciary. See Tingsgård, 'Sverige i Afghanistan', pp. 48, 83–84, 128.

- 156 The donor assistance in Afghanistan generally appeared uncoordinated, which contributes to explaining the country's lack of progress towards sustainability. USIP describes how the Afghan government complained that aid donors sidelined them in favour of implementing their own priorities. However, as the government did not address the extensive corruption in which it was complicit, donors continued to manage projects unilaterally. Biswal et al., 'Afghanistan study group', p. 24.

6 Civilian Capacity Building

The Main Problems

Introduction

The 20-year international involvement in Afghanistan was marked by a sustained focus on civilian development. This development was ideally intended to rebuild the country after the prolonged insurgency against the Soviet invasion, the subsequent civil war, the years under the first Taliban regime, and the US-led regime change operation.

The civilian effort over these 20 years must be viewed in the context of military security provision and security sector reforms, which, under the framework of UN resolutions and the Bonn Agreement of 2001, aimed to create a free, independent and politically inclusive Afghanistan based on democratic principles. It is pertinent to incorporate military security provision, because the civilian effort was closely linked to military initiatives through NATO's Comprehensive Approach (CA) concept. This chapter will detail the challenges facing the civilian development effort while briefly touching on the initial humanitarian relief initiatives.

The chapter begins by reviewing the political agreements and mandates for the development efforts, the ideas behind them, the organisational division of labour between the UN and NATO, and the fragmented distribution of responsibilities among various actors.

It then describes the different phases and characteristics of the civilian effort over the 20 years – an effort that sought to balance Afghan ownership with external assistance, centralisation with local anchoring, and security with development. This section also addresses the CA, which gained prominence in Afghanistan in 2003. The three phases of civilian development were characterised by a political focus on the legitimacy of the central government (2001–05), a focus on counter-insurgency and the use of civilian resources to support this aim (2006–11), and, finally, a focus on institution building as a prerequisite for the withdrawal of international military forces from 2011 onwards.

The final part of the chapter examines five major challenges faced by the civilian effort in the 20-year period, namely: (1) The persistent security deficit that rendered the comprehensive approach ineffective; (2) the military leadership of civilian initiatives, which simultaneously reflected a competencies deficit; (3) the amount of civilian development funding that failed to translate into

development but instead exacerbated corruption; (4) a disconnection from Afghan ownership (and marginalisation of the central government) due to donor-country constraints and priorities; and, finally, (5) the extreme dependency on donors, whereby NGOs and private actors effectively acted as subcontractors for the contributing states' projects, which challenged ownership and sustainability.

Sources

This chapter is based on international evaluations of the efforts in Afghanistan, including reports from Sweden, Norway, Canada, the Netherlands and Australia, as well as several evaluation reports from the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and the US Institute of Peace (USIP). These evaluations, along with reports produced by DIIS in 2009 (Stepputat) and 2016 (Andersen), provide the basis for identifying a number of factors within the civilian development effort that can illuminate why what was intended to be a bulwark against the Taliban did not succeed. The perspectives in these reports are complemented by relevant scholarly literature, particularly in the fields of peacebuilding, stabilisation operations and state-building. Relevant explanations from these research areas have been included to the extent that they elucidate the observations made in the evaluation reports.

Background: The ideas and actors behind the civilian effort

The basis for the civilian effort in Afghanistan was established through UN Security Council resolutions and the Bonn Agreement of December 2001. Since the Taliban first seized power in Afghanistan in 1996, the Security Council had committed to Afghanistan's sovereignty and independence while simultaneously condemning the Taliban's collaboration with terrorist organisations, their support for opium production and their repression of the civilian population, particularly women and girls.¹ After the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, neither the UN, the US, the other regional states nor the international community considered the Taliban a legitimate government. With Security Council Resolution 1368 of 12 September 2001, the UN called for international cooperation to hold both al-Qaeda and the Taliban accountable for the attacks, which paved the way for a new regime. On 14 November 2001, just over five weeks after the US militarily intervened in Afghanistan, the UN initiated political negotiations between the neighbouring countries, Russia and the US regarding the establishment of a new, sovereign Afghan state (the so-called 'six plus two' negotiations). This process was mandated by Security Council Resolution 1378, which called on UN member states to support the establishment of a new and legitimate government in Kabul.² The Bonn Agreement of

5 December 2001, thus focused on peace, stability and reconstruction through the establishment of permanent institutions in Afghanistan.³

Following the conclusion of the Bonn Agreement, a series of donor conferences was held to agree on the frameworks and priorities for international development efforts. Conferences were held in Tokyo in 2002, Berlin in April 2004, Kabul in April 2005, London in February 2006 (the London Conference resulted in the agreement known as the 'Afghanistan Compact'), Paris in June 2008 and London in January 2010. The Berlin Agreement of 2004 stipulated that international partners committed to supporting the central government in Kabul in building a 'secure, stable, prosperous, and democratic Afghanistan'.⁴ Economic and social development, security, the development of the private sector, the establishment of the rule of law and the strengthening of human rights were thus the ideals underpinning state-building efforts.⁵ Although the primary political aim of the American engagement in Afghanistan and the contributions from coalition countries was to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven from which terrorist organisations could launch attacks against the West,⁶ the initiative was accompanied from the outset by a focus on building a centralised state.^{7,8} The approach was based on three pillars: Democratically held presidential and parliamentary elections, a strong central government, and effective institutions to implement the central government's decisions.⁹

An acute need for security around the civilian effort emerged following the fall of the Taliban. In accordance with the Bonn Agreement, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was established on 20 December 2001. ISAF aimed to provide security, safety and freedom of movement for all UN-deployed personnel, state actors, international organisations and non-governmental humanitarian organisations (NGOs).¹⁰ The civilian effort in Afghanistan was based on a 'post-conflict understanding' of the country in which security was primarily intended to support the civilian effort; however, this premise did not align with the actual situation in Afghanistan at the time.¹¹

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) was established in March 2002 to assist the interim Afghan government and coordinate the UN's own disaster relief and development efforts alongside other international organisations and NGOs. From the outset, there were thus two international organisations leading distinct tasks: ISAF was responsible for security, while UNAMA coordinated the civilian effort. Security was prioritised, as the vast majority of financial aid was allocated to military capacity building, with an increasing proportion of funds for civilian efforts primarily supporting military security initiatives. Given that both NATO and the UN aimed for a minimal footprint, both efforts were intended to be based on the highest possible degree of Afghan ownership and pace.¹²

Afghan ownership over its own security and development was a recurring theme across all of the agreements and mandates for international efforts. Nonetheless, the international development initiative, characterised by what is known as 'liberal peacebuilding', ultimately became extremely donor-driven, creating inherent tensions between Afghan self-determination and

the significant dependence on external assistance from the outset.¹³ Over the years, this contradiction became particularly evident when funding was allocated to civilian development initiatives at the numerous donor conferences.¹⁴ For instance, at the Kabul Conference in April 2005, Afghan President Hamid Karzai expressed a desire for more funding to flow through the central government rather than bypassing it, as well as for greater financial allocation to the development of infrastructure that promoted mobility and protected civilian populations.¹⁵ Throughout the 20-year period, however, the majority of aid was given off-budget, and estimates suggest that only between 10% and 25% of the civilian aid effectively contributed to the rebuilding of Afghanistan.¹⁶ The remainder went to salaries and administrative costs. A significant portion of these funds ended in the pockets of Afghan officials and others in powerful positions. As highlighted by several evaluations we have reviewed, the outcome was that neither Afghan institutional capacity for self-directed development nor a proportional improvement in the living conditions of the average Afghan was ever realised.¹⁷

From 2002 onwards, the US and ISAF established the so-called Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which coordinated security creation and civilian development efforts in local communities.¹⁸ Initially, this coordination had a narrow military focus on intelligence gathering, with the security of the involved nations in mind; however, as ISAF expanded, the PRTs began to focus more explicitly on extending the authority of the Afghan government and strengthening local support for Kabul.¹⁹ Thus, the military and civilian efforts in the provinces and districts were intended to support central authority exercised from Kabul.

Over the course of the 20-year period, there were three concurrent operations, each with its primary actor and share of the civilian effort. Following the events of 11 September 2001, and as a driving force behind the American War on Terror, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) concentrated on defeating al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. A number of emergency aid programmes were established under OEF, and US forces allocated resources to small development projects within the framework of the Civil–Military Cooperation (CIMIC) concept, which fostered collaboration with local actors in the operational areas. CIMIC aimed to protect the operational freedom of military units and was therefore not involved in the civilian efforts oriented towards reconstruction. In addition, UNAMA was tasked with coordinating the UN humanitarian relief, recovery and development activities, while ISAF was responsible for providing security for these initiatives.²⁰ From August 2003, NATO took command of ISAF, and the operational area was expanded to implement the Bonn Agreement throughout the rest of Afghanistan, primarily by creating security for international actors.²¹ Consequently, ISAF was responsible for supporting the Afghan government's exercise of authority and the civilian effort by providing security throughout Afghanistan. Thus, Afghanistan hosted three distinct international efforts, each with its own focus: The US pursued al-Qaeda primarily through military means, the UN implemented the Bonn Agreement and coordinated civilian and humanitarian initiatives, and NATO provided security through military operations and CIMIC projects.

Within the civilian effort, a number of donor countries committed to taking responsibility for different sectors in coordination with the UN, the World Bank and the relevant Afghan authorities.²² The civilian effort was generally just as fragmented as the security sector reforms, which were divided among multiple responsible nations. Additionally, there were many NGOs, each focusing on specific areas, their own budgets and own objectives.²³ Consequently, the civilian effort consisted of a myriad of different and often competing externally funded international, national and non-national initiatives. The lack of coordination between security creation and the civilian effort – as well as internally among the various sectors of development initiatives – resulted in military commands taking over responsibility for some of the local institution-building and civilian development that was rooted in the PRTs. While this enabled increased coordination within individual areas of military operations, one of the consequences of different national commands in the five Afghan regions and nationally managed PRTs was that the overall civilian effort became further fragmented and devoid of Afghan ownership.²⁴ National contributors and international donors also hindered coordination and centralised oversight from other major donors, even though this was intended to harmonise the many initiatives within the same areas of expertise.²⁵

The international effort over 20 years

The civilian effort underwent multiple transformations over the 20-year period and can be broadly divided into three phases: Initially focusing on strengthening the central government (2001–05), transitioning to a supportive role in counterinsurgency (2006–11), and ultimately prioritising institution building in anticipation of the impending withdrawal (2011–21). In the early stages, the effort concentrated on humanitarian assistance, food provision and support for political reconstruction. However, as the United States shifted its strategy in 2006 from counterterrorism to counterinsurgency, the civilian initiative increasingly focused on development projects that could bolster the Afghan central government in Kabul. The expansion of ISAF into western, southern and eastern Afghanistan beginning in 2005 exacerbated the security situation across much of the country, which complicated civilian operations. This contributed to the emphasis on so-called Quick Impact Projects (QIPs), which aimed to quickly establish local facilities and institutions to secure government support; the underlying assumption being that this would in turn reduce support for the Taliban. Consequently, the civilian-oriented effort, along with its partially humanitarian components, became directly linked to the counterinsurgency initiatives of the US and NATO. Following the dissolution of ISAF and the establishment of RSM in 2015, the civilian effort was expected to continue to ensure backing for the ANDSF and the Afghan central government.

2001–05: Focus on the legitimacy of the Afghan central government

Following the American assault on al-Qaeda and the Taliban on 7 October 2001, humanitarian aid was dispatched to Afghanistan to assist the civilian population

in recovering after nearly 30 years of war and internal conflict. When the United States initiated the War on Terror in Afghanistan, the Bush administration did not intend to embark on long-term state-building, meaning that civilian assistance in the form of emergency aid was primarily aimed at securing the acceptance of the American military intervention by both the local population and the international community.²⁶ However, after the Taliban reorganised and consolidated their power in the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan in 2003, the US began a more formal state-building effort aimed at strengthening the Afghan central government in preparation for the 2004 presidential elections.²⁷ This initiative primarily focused on infrastructure and local institutions.²⁸ Up until 2004, the US built government institutions and mobility-enhancing infrastructure for the Afghan presidential and parliamentary elections, while the remaining development efforts appeared fragmented and driven by the divergent priorities of both state and non-state actors.²⁹

Between 2001 and 2002, the outlines of a development plan emerged, centred on international cooperation and engagement. The intention was for the numerous international efforts to maintain a small footprint, allowing development to be led by the Afghans themselves with assistance from the international community.³⁰ If it were up to the United States, the UN would coordinate the civilian initiatives; however, due to a lack of UN-organisation engagement, the US turned its attention to other international actors, including the EU.³¹ In the aftermath of the Bonn Agreement of 2001 and the Tokyo Conference in early 2002, it became clear that there was no single entity responsible for the civilian effort, despite the fact that UNAMA was expected to undertake this role. Consequently, various states, international organisations and NGOs began their humanitarian and institution-building initiatives at their own pace, with little coordination between them.

This placed enormous pressure on the Afghan transitional administration, which was not organised to manage or coordinate the multitude of diverse initiatives. Afghanistan has historically lacked a political tradition characterised by a significant degree of central regulation or the necessary national economy to establish a sovereign and legitimate government capable of securing the state and delivering essential services to the population.³² This is one of the reasons why Afghanistan has been predisposed to dependency on external economic support or to being tied to regional economic dynamics. Furthermore, the Afghan economy had become even more fragmented and reliant on regional structures since the Soviet invasion in December 1979.³³

Despite political disagreements regarding the approaches of various countries to development aid, making the Afghan central government stronger became the focal point for military security efforts and civilian development initiatives. From 2002 onwards, the efforts aimed to extend the authority of the central administration across Afghanistan, operating under the belief that the transitional administration established by the Bonn Agreement would be accepted as a legitimate government throughout the country.³⁴ ISAF's area of responsibility expanded from Kabul to encompass all of Afghanistan, while NATO decided to apply significant military force to establish a unified and sovereign Afghanistan with a democratically elected government in Kabul.³⁵ Initially, development projects progressed reasonably well,

particularly between 2001 and 2004, when the future president Ashraf Ghani, as Karzai's adviser and Minister of Finance in the transitional administration, implemented economic reforms.³⁶ Ghani had experience from the World Bank and had worked on development strategies, including a focus on local ownership and national solidarity programmes between the provinces.³⁷ However, due to internal unrest within the government, Ghani's influence waned, and his reform initiatives became less significant. As political power struggles and worsening corruption plagued the reputation and operations of successive Afghan governments, the civilian development efforts increasingly bypassed Kabul.³⁸ Paradoxically, while the development initiative aimed directly at securing local acceptance of the Afghan government over 20 years, it was simultaneously conducted without the government's involvement.

International assistance was initially directed towards disaster relief, emergency aid and locally anchored development in education and health. Subsequently, civilian development aid was primarily allocated to the establishment of the social structures preferred by Western donors. Consequently, many development initiatives prioritised welfare services (e.g., education, health) rather than strengthening agriculture, industry and the trade sector, which could have provided the income base that the Afghan government required to reinforce the country. While it can be argued that the Afghan government was too fragmented to undertake this task effectively, the international efforts examined here did not focus on long-term development.³⁹

2006–11: Counterinsurgency sets the framework

From the Afghan presidential election in 2004 until the parliamentary election in 2005, the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated significantly. Just three years after the Bonn Agreement, the failure to meet the expectations of the local population, coupled with increasing corruption in Kabul and among local governors, led many Afghans to turn against the government. In several districts, the rebellion of the local population against local authority was either resolved by Kabul appointing a new governor – who often proved to be corrupt – or by using armed force to protect the incumbent powers.⁴⁰ For instance, during the expansion of ISAF into Helmand, the commander of the British Task Force was ordered to protect the power base of a criminal and corrupt head of security in Sangin, which subsequently created enormous security challenges for British forces in the years 2006–11.⁴¹

These security challenges meant that the civilian efforts increasingly fell under the control of the US, which integrated the initiatives within the numerous PRTs. The intention was for the military units within the PRTs to provide the necessary security for civilian initiatives, which were to be coordinated between the UN, the World Bank and supplemented by the many NGOs. Selected troop-contributing countries assumed leadership roles for each PRT; however, despite the overarching developmental frameworks, the civilian development efforts remained largely uncoordinated across regions, provinces and districts.⁴²

With the ISAF expanding into the more unstable southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan in 2006, the military footprint on the civilian initiatives gradually increased. As the US shifted its focus to counterinsurgency (COIN) from 2006 onwards, the civilian initiatives were directly adapted to support ISAF's operational patterns. Consequently, financial resources and development projects were primarily allocated to address unrest, which NATO troops suppressed with hard military force.⁴³ Thus, from 2006 onwards, the civilian effort in the southern and eastern provinces became 'hitched to' the military campaign. Police stations, schools and health facilities were constructed using external funding, while the capacity for Afghans to devise their own solutions in local areas in coordination with the central government was not significantly developed.⁴⁴

2011–21: Institution building

Following the withdrawal of Obama's short-lived troop surge, the US and ISAF shifted their focus in 2011 to transferring security responsibilities to the ANDSF. This also impacted the focus of the civilian initiatives, intensifying the use of development funds for direct security provision through QIPs. As ISAF withdrew and the ANDSF struggled to secure areas, increasing amounts of funding were allocated to development aimed at achieving rapid security outcomes.⁴⁵ While the primary goal was to win the local population over to the government's side, the substantial amounts spent on development projects had the opposite effect. Firstly, civilian efforts were directed more at addressing unrest and less at fostering stability in secure areas, and secondly, the majority of the funds ended up enriching a small number of power holders rather than benefiting the local community.⁴⁶ In the lead-up to and during the 2014 presidential election, civilian initiatives were employed to generate support for the parliamentary process, based on the belief that democratically held elections would suffice to confer legitimacy on the government. However, due to the changing security situation in provincial and district areas, these civilian efforts did not result in noticeable economic or social development for the local communities.⁴⁷

Both during the population-centric COIN approach from 2009 and the subsequent exit strategy from 2011, military efforts were conceived as supporting civilian initiatives.⁴⁸ Yet, in the absence of civilian capacities and competencies, local political backing or relevant civilian development was never established following military interventions.⁴⁹ On the contrary, many military campaigns were executed with short-term troop increases (including the surge) and were heavily followed up by QIPs, which neither generated security nor addressed Afghanistan's local political and socioeconomic issues.⁵⁰ This short-term concentration of forces was repeated in 2017, when Trump deployed military power to achieve a victory over the insurgents and bring the Taliban to the negotiating table.⁵¹ In the period leading up to the Doha Agreement in February 2020, civilian initiatives focused on building institutions and facilities for the central government and security forces. The short-term political objectives behind the changing operational deployments from 2011 to 2014 often mirrored corresponding short-term tactical-level reinforcements. This focus frequently led to so-called *raids*, where ISAF forces operated

in Afghan villages under the cover of night or early morning with the aim of ‘disrupting’ and confronting the Taliban. Subsequently, QIPs, CIMIC and/or locally NGO-driven development initiatives were to be rolled out to re-establish trust with the local population.⁵² The result, however, was often the exact opposite, as local Afghans perceived security to be deteriorating and their privacy to be under threat. The ‘foreign’ forces arriving unannounced and without justification frequently led to an escalation of violence.⁵³

Comprehensive approach to security and development

A defining feature of the civilian initiatives in Afghanistan was their emphasis on a comprehensive approach to civilian and military efforts; even more so than previous international stabilisation operations.⁵⁴ Shortly after assuming leadership of ISAF in 2003, NATO sought to combine political, civilian and military actions within the CA framework.⁵⁵ This concept aimed to create a better synergy between security and development. ISAF represented NATO’s first major stabilisation operation with a focus on state-building, and the various contributing nations held different political ambitions regarding the provision of a comprehensive, integrated approach in Afghanistan. Despite NATO developing the CA concept from 2004 onwards, there were few established guidelines for how each contributing nation should implement it within its operational area.⁵⁶ Operations in the Balkans, particularly the NATO mission in Kosovo in 1999, demonstrated that military security and civilian development efforts must necessarily be interconnected and integrated into the overall state-building process. Additionally, several NATO countries, including the US, UK, Poland and Denmark, had experience from Iraq that necessitated a new and more comprehensive, coordinated (i.e., comprehensive) understanding of stabilisation operations.⁵⁷

Given that ISAF was a multinational effort involving both NATO members and non-NATO countries, political support and troop contributions became a decisive element for the mission. The NATO deployments came to resemble a patchwork of various national contributions spread across Afghanistan, shaped by national political interests.⁵⁸ Competencies and experience with CA tied to the real and specific development needs in the various Afghan provinces were relegated to the background. Simultaneously, there were diverging perceptions of how and to what extent civilian initiatives should be integrated with NATO strategies and military operational plans.⁵⁹ In Afghanistan, therefore, there was room for very broad interpretations of the CA, which were often manifested differently across the numerous military operations and civilian initiatives.⁶⁰ CA was thus more of a national concern, pliable to the political preferences of each contributing nation, and less a guiding strategic concept.⁶¹ Depending on nationality, branch of the military or unit type, the various PRTs operated differently both between regions and internally within provinces over time.⁶² As the missions faltered and the security situation deteriorated, the military contribution became more pronounced, taking control from the civilian initiatives.

Following the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, CA became the guiding vision for ISAF, which also made it the framework for civilian initiatives.⁶³

The various PRTs were established as the organisational basis for CA, initially as civilian and nationally anchored entities, and later evolving into units more directly governed by ISAF and reliant on military capabilities.⁶⁴

The main challenges in the civilian capacity building

From the outset, the American campaign against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, alongside the international political focus on establishing a liberal democratic central government, defined the civilian initiatives in Afghanistan. This led to the military escalations and de-escalations by the US and NATO, as well as the Afghan parliamentary elections, serving as a backdrop for development efforts. Concurrently, the security situation influenced the development work – more and more projects with shorter and shorter timeframes.⁶⁵ Consequently, the underlying CIMIC mindset became foundational for a significant number of the civilian initiatives. The QIPs rapidly emerged as the dominant logic behind development throughout the 2000s, being prioritised particularly in areas where the fighting was most intense. Development thus became a tool to support military units in their combat against the Taliban and the subsequent establishment of security in peripheral areas.⁶⁶ However, due to frequent changes in priorities and operational plans, these many QIPs succeeded neither in creating local security nor state legitimacy.⁶⁷

Afghanistan therefore became less a 20-year, sustained effort and more a series of 20 individual, year-long initiatives.⁶⁸ After the US had largely defeated and displaced the Taliban within three months, many challenges arose in implementing the Bonn Agreement. By late 2002, when the Taliban began reorganising to return to Afghanistan (see the chapter on the Taliban's strength and strategy), the US was politically preoccupied with and militarily engaged in Iraq. Consequently, both the military and civilian efforts in Afghanistan were directed towards short-term objectives, including the presidential and parliamentary elections and ISAF expansion. By 2002, the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections became a pivotal framework for the initiatives in Afghanistan and a tenuous indicator of success.⁶⁹ The ANDSF troop numbers were therefore often increased leading up to and during the Afghan elections, just as the use of QIPs was intensified, both to ensure security during the elections and to garner local support for the central government in Kabul. The democratisation of Afghanistan consequently 'took over' the agenda, despite the absence of that which was critical: Structures to ensure representativeness.⁷⁰ ISAF and the US initially devoted substantial resources to supporting a political system and a centralised government in Kabul that had minimal popular support outside the capital.⁷¹

The security situation restricted the development

In accordance with the UN mandate, ISAF was a security assistance force primarily tasked with establishing security as a prerequisite for civilian initiatives within the Bonn Agreement framework. Despite NATO fully implementing the CA concept in Afghanistan from 2008, it was never the intention for ISAF to coordinate large

portions of the civilian effort.⁷² For NATO, the comprehensive approach to civilian and military initiatives was neither a strategy nor an operational plan but rather an overarching mindset aimed at creating coherence and enhanced coordination between ISAF security operations and the civilian efforts of international organisations, NGOs and states within the political agreements established in 2001 and 2006.⁷³ The primary challenge facing the comprehensive approach was that many civilian initiatives were influenced more by domestic and development policy considerations in the contributing nations and the various agendas of donors than by the political and security situation in Afghanistan.⁷⁴ Moreover, there were persistent concerns among international organisations and NGOs that the humanitarian space would be compromised if civilian initiatives became ‘hitched’ to military operations or, more generally, associated with them. This imbalance plagued the civilian effort throughout the entire 20-year engagement, as security gradually became a precondition for development, which dictated the direction of civilian initiatives.

When ISAF entered Helmand and Kandahar in 2006, it did so as a consequence of – and yet without learning the lessons from – the Iraq War, deploying a force that was far too small and quickly became stretched too thin. Consequently, ISAF was able neither to defeat the Taliban nor to provide security for local communities.⁷⁵ During periods when the security situation deteriorated, military units often found themselves isolated in the most remote parts of Afghanistan and having to assume responsibility for civilian initiatives.⁷⁶ This led to the establishment of PRTs tasked with coordinating civilian efforts based on local development needs and Afghan ownership.⁷⁷ However, challenges arose with the PRTs, as, despite having a civilian-led structure focused on development, they primarily had military capacities and personnel at their disposal, alongside earmarked aid funds. Since NATO had solely committed to providing military security and the civilian effort remained largely uncoordinated, it often fell to individual contributing countries to coordinate and finance civilian development projects alongside their military units and national PRTs. This coordination task created difficulties in the civil–military cooperative relations and the delineation of responsibilities within the contributing nations, as well as between the countries, international organisations and NGOs involved. Across contributing countries, inter-ministerial disputes over development priorities and cross-ministerial projects influenced the specific initiatives in Afghanistan.⁷⁸ Consequently, projects in operational areas usually became compromises between the departments in the home countries rather than a genuine comprehensive approach to civilian and military efforts. National projects, constrained by what was politically feasible, led to further fragmentation of the comprehensive approach across Afghanistan’s regions and provinces, as countries implemented increasingly large financial budgets outside the international development efforts and the Afghan government, favouring projects that supported their own forces.⁷⁹

The imbalance between security and development was further exacerbated following the ISAF expansion into southern and eastern Afghanistan in 2006 and the strengthening of existing PRTs in regions such as Helmand, Kandahar, Uruzgan and Paktia. The intention was for the civilian effort to take precedence, with the role of the military serving only as a secondary support to ensure the civilian initiatives.⁸⁰

However, due to a lack of civilian experts to coordinate and manage the anticipated development projects, and as the security situation worsened following the initial deployment of larger military units to southern and eastern Afghanistan in mid-2006, military security provision came to dominate the shaping of the development initiatives. Only under immense military security efforts were large-scale and long-term development projects feasible, and the national programmes of contributing nations increasingly struggled to maintain a balance between security and development. Similar problems arose in the relationship between the PRTs and the numerous international organisations and NGOs that refused to operate together with or under the protection of military forces. In the absence of genuine development projects within the many PRTs, more financial resources were diverted to military security-related CIMIC projects and into operational areas via national NGOs, which were present through local Afghan partners.⁸¹ This increasing reliance on CIMIC for development projects and the heightened use of local NGOs led to the militarisation of civilian and humanitarian efforts.⁸² Without long-term and coordinated development, military initiatives took control, tipping the balance between development and security in favour of military security. From 2006 onwards, ISAF transitioned to counterinsurgency (COIN), wherein security became the primary objective, while development was relegated to a supporting role. The COIN doctrine's 'clear-hold-build' mentality meant that civilian development was increasingly viewed as a beneficial follow-up effort, leading to greater fragmentation of the civilian effort.⁸³ The civilian development effort was no longer an end unto itself but rather the final piece of the military COIN doctrine. Beginning with Operation Moshtarak in Marjah in the spring of 2009 – the first major operation under the surge in the years 2009–11 – the comprehensive approach to civilian and military efforts largely ceased to play a significant role in the development of Afghanistan.⁸⁴

The military directed the efforts

Both before and after the implementation of the COIN doctrine in ISAF, the civilian effort played a subordinate role in the contributions of many countries. The contributions from most nations were structured around a military framework, wherein a civilian element was embedded.⁸⁵ The vast majority of contributing nations thus deployed to Afghanistan with military solutions to non-military problems, along with an overwhelming presence of military personnel. Since the necessary security to initiate civilian efforts was lacking, CA concept influenced task execution by imparting a military character to civilian initiatives, which generally supported military security operations. The alternative was to accept that civilian initiatives could not commence in southern and eastern Afghanistan, as these areas could in no way be characterised as 'post-conflict zones' in 2005–06, when ISAF was deployed. For some countries, the composition of their contributions reflected an inter-ministerial dispute between the ministry of defence and the ministries of international development and aid; that is, it became a matter of improving cooperation and coordination across ministries.⁸⁶ For other nations, a significant military

footprint was an end unto itself; thus, their efforts were focused more on security provision and less on development. Several of the countries that lacked traditions pertaining to offensive military security provision or political support for a comprehensive approach to civilian development initiatives and military operations felt compelled to allow the military footprint to play the primary role.⁸⁷ Despite an overarching emphasis on a comprehensive approach to civilian and military efforts under civilian command, the operational pattern in the numerous PRTs was consequently built around military security provision.⁸⁸ Many PRTs effectively operated as military headquarters governed by military planning procedures.⁸⁹ As such, the PRTs became more of a tool in the overall campaign against al-Qaeda and the Taliban than an organisational framework for coordinating various actors' humanitarian support and development initiatives.⁹⁰ As ISAF expanded into southern and eastern Afghanistan, an increasing number of PRTs became multinational, the military personnel outnumbering the civilians. From 2006 onwards, the vast majority of contributions from various countries focused on troop numbers organised around military units for counterinsurgency, the civilian effort merely intended to stabilise areas that the military had recaptured from the Taliban.⁹¹ Thereafter, the CA concept tipped towards a purely military operation, involving the extensive use of the aforementioned QIPs to maintain control over these areas.

In the provinces and districts where civilian development projects remained possible, these initiatives were generally implemented with a focus on maintaining a security situation favourable to ISAF units.⁹² Each time the security situation changed or intelligence indicated potential Taliban attacks, civilian initiatives were deprioritised in favour of military operations against the Taliban.⁹³ As a consequence of few military leaders having contributed to national development strategies, there was a disconnect between the development objectives in their respective ministries and the military focus in Afghanistan.⁹⁴ The regular deployment of new commanders for military combat units with their own operational areas in Afghanistan led to shifts in military focus that resulted in the already tenuous connection with the civilian effort dissipating.⁹⁵ As military control and focus on the fight against the Taliban increased, the civilian initiatives became enmeshed in the interests of local power holders, whereby CIMIC projects intended to protect military forces supplanted long-term civilian development efforts. This dynamic challenged the development–security relationship, as development projects that did not wish to be seen as part of military operations were delayed due to security challenges.⁹⁶ Similarly, many CIMIC projects in regions such as Helmand province were postponed or shelved when the security situation did not permit military security forces to be deployed elsewhere by their respective commanders.⁹⁷

In addition to security-related factors, the lack of competent and available civilian development advisers was a significant reason for the military control over civilian initiatives. Throughout the 20-year period, the civilian effort suffered from a fundamental absence of influential civilian experts with the necessary planning competencies.⁹⁸ This resulted in a significant skills gap between the respective countries' development ministries and the poorly resourced headquarters in Afghanistan's provinces and districts. Development strategies, complete with

financial frameworks and national priorities, were thus not supported by genuine civilian competence or experience in the operational areas.⁹⁹ From the highest military NATO headquarters in Kabul to the smallest PRTs in the provinces, civilian advisers were few in number. When NATO implemented the CA and COIN doctrine from 2006, there was merely one civilian development adviser assigned to the staff supporting the American commander in ISAF.¹⁰⁰ The absence of civilian advisers in the many PRTs was primarily due to a lack of field experience and a general difficulty in deploying civilian officials to Afghanistan.¹⁰¹ From the outset of the engagement, the number of civilian experts was insufficient, and as the positions for development advisers remained vacant, military personnel gradually took over the civilian effort.¹⁰² This worsened the cooperation with NGOs, which either withdrew from the areas out of fear of being ensnared by the military agenda or accepted employment as subcontractors for the many national initiatives under the auspices of the PRTs.

Too much money

As the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated, resources were increasingly allocated to civilian development. This resulted in far too much money being spent too quickly on short-term development projects aimed at supporting security provision, undermining the acceptance of the central government in Kabul. The enormous amounts of money contributed to the emergence of local political conflicts, social inequality across provinces, and heightened corruption at all levels of governance.¹⁰³ The contributing countries often linked the achievement of objectives more to a 'money spent' criterion than to actual development.

The US is estimated to have spent more than \$145 billion solely on development aid. Beside this amount, there were contributions from other donors and humanitarian organisations, and the EU provided €65 billion from 2002 to 2020.¹⁰⁴ The coordinated effort through the World Bank amounted to an average of \$4 billion annually from 2001 to 2021.¹⁰⁵ Consequently, significantly more money was spent on civilian efforts than recommended by the UN, which in 2002 estimated that \$15 billion should be spent over a decade.¹⁰⁶ From an economic perspective, far too much was allocated to development aid relative to the amount of money already circulating in Afghanistan. From 2002 to 2005, American development assistance alone quadrupled, corresponding to almost 50% of Afghanistan's GDP.¹⁰⁷ From 2005 to 2012, American development aid periodically amounted to between 75% and 100% of Afghan GDP.¹⁰⁸ Development aid exceeded both the UN estimates and disregarded Afghanistan's absorptive capacity, which is a central consideration in development cooperation.¹⁰⁹

Throughout the various phases of military security provision (from counterterrorism to counterinsurgency and capacity building), the amount of money was increasingly viewed as an increasingly important means to address challenges. The worsening security situation and the Taliban's growing strength in relation to the Afghan central government were managed by investing more money in development projects. The use of money as a tool stemmed primarily from

Washington's shifting strategies, but other nations and the EU also contributed significantly to the problem. In many European countries, military engagement in Afghanistan sparked domestic political battles that intensified as the number of soldiers killed rose and the Taliban's power position strengthened. As a result, the increase in funding was not based on an analysis of Afghan needs or positive lessons learned from development projects in Afghanistan; instead, the expanding financial framework was often driven by domestic political considerations to maintain the opposition's support for the mission despite military casualties.¹¹⁰ Additionally, funds from individual donor countries earmarked for the development of Afghanistan generally had to be used where their own soldiers were stationed. Several contributing nations deliberately chose to bolster local development, circumventing the Afghan central government, which, due to bureaucracy and rising corruption, could not guarantee that the funds would be used within the prioritised areas or according to established budgets and timelines.¹¹¹ The vast majority of aid was given off-budget, reducing Kabul's ability to prioritise and manage its own development.¹¹² The flow of money outside the government did not diminish corruption, however, merely shifting the corruption problem. Connections remained between the political elite in Kabul and private companies that acted as subcontractors for both international forces' facilities and large internationally funded infrastructure projects. In the first governments, former warlords took positions as ministers for defence, energy and rural development. From these positions, they maintained and expanded their networks by systematically siphoning money from both the Afghan state and the many international donations. These networks thus controlled the flow of money from Kabul to the provinces and vice versa.¹¹³ Therefore, it was more the volume of money spent than the manner in which it was allocated (on-budget/off-budget) that contributed to the increasing corruption.¹¹⁴ Despite attempts to monitor contracts and agreements and a growing focus on corruption in Afghanistan, neither the US nor NATO managed to combat it effectively. In a report from 2021, SIGAR concluded that the US effort in Afghanistan in 2018–19 had wasted at least \$3.4 billion on fraud and abuse.¹¹⁵

Moreover, the numerous nationally anchored development projects significantly contributed to competent civilian servants and administrators leaving government positions in Kabul to work for private companies and local politicians.¹¹⁶ Many local contractors profited immensely from the construction of infrastructure and institutions (particularly in health and education) through the various national initiatives of contributing countries, CIMIC projects and NGO efforts. The Afghan central government was adversely affected as competent officials left their jobs for private Afghan enterprises and international actors. At no point did the amount of money spent on development correspond to a perception of progress among the civilian population as a whole.¹¹⁷ On the contrary, most projects were carried out in the most unstable areas, which impacted their sustainability. The large share of off-budget aid also contributed to tensions between the donors and successive Afghan governments, as well as among competing national development projects in the operational areas.¹¹⁸

In addition to the substantial funds channelled into the Afghan economy by the US, EU, World Bank and individual contributing nations, many NGOs also contributed to the supply problem. Various NGOs competed for the same financial resources from state budgets, private foundations and international donors. These funds were typically earmarked for specific purposes that were largely uncoordinated with either NATO's military efforts or the Afghan central government. Instead, the Afghan government found itself in open competition with numerous NGOs for international funding, as these NGOs often secured large financial donations due to their greater transparency and quicker documentation regarding the use of major contributions. Over the years, this contributed to undermining Afghan ownership and the tempo of reconstruction efforts, which hurt the trust in the delivery capabilities of the various Afghan ministries.¹¹⁹ The vast civilian effort thus highlighted the incompetence of the Afghan central government rather than bolstering its legitimacy.¹²⁰

The excessive amount of money combined with an increasing short-term focus constituted a dangerous development policy cocktail. The attempt to create security through hastily executed development projects had the opposite effect, as Afghanistan's war economy (as of 2001) was suddenly complemented by a donor-driven economy. As numerous projects failed to deliver the desired development, including a functioning judicial system, the legitimacy of the Afghan central government was weakened rather than strengthened. Instead of building the state and central government from the inside-out and bottom-up, development was managed externally and top-down by the many contributing nations, international actors, private companies and NGOs.¹²¹ Far too rarely were civilian initiatives aimed at strengthening the Afghan economy by, for example, stimulating international demand for Afghan goods or financing and implementing locally anchored development projects with local labour. Over time, the allocation of the extensive aid funds became an end unto itself¹²²; even at the provincial level, the influx of excessive money and increasing donor dependence created an environment in which local moneyed interests vied for funds and power at the expense of the local population.¹²³ In the period following the gradual assumption of security responsibilities by the Afghan government beginning in 2011, development aid was generally used to strengthen the private sector, with very few resources allocated to state development of infrastructure and the overall Afghan economy.

Domestic objectives behind the initiatives

One of the major challenges facing the overall civilian effort in Afghanistan was that the numerous contributing countries often prioritised national issues within their areas of operations over the long-term development of the entire country. Despite the objective of civilian initiatives to build and support a centralised Afghan government, each contributing country had its own plan for how this should occur, both in relation to the overarching development policy objectives as well as for the funding invested in the respective areas of operations.¹²⁴ Consequently, civilian development in Afghanistan resembled more a disjointed patchwork of varying

national priorities across time and space and less a coordinated international effort grounded in genuine local needs. This trend was particularly evident in the early efforts in Kabul and northern Afghanistan, the ISAF expansion from 2005 to 2006, throughout the different phases of the combat against the Taliban from 2006 onwards, and during RSM from 2015 onwards. The varying political objectives and conditions for assuming leadership in provinces and districts influenced the composition of each nation's civilian and military contributions, within both PRTs and the NATO's military headquarters. Thus, the political objectives for national development initiatives were guided more by political negotiations in the capitals of contributing nations than by substantive analyses of the political and tactical situation in Afghanistan and the local needs of the areas in which they were operating.

The Iraq War in 2003 is central to understanding the coordination and execution of the expansion of ISAF's operational area and, consequently, the civilian effort in southern and eastern Afghanistan. For some countries, contributions to ISAF's expansion in southern Afghanistan were seen as compensation for not participating in the Iraq War despite American requests to do so; for others, these contributions represented an attempt to exit Iraq while simultaneously creating domestic political stability by engaging in 'the good war'.¹²⁵ In Canada, the government resisted American pressure and decided not to deploy forces to Iraq in 2003 while simultaneously committing a larger number of troops to Kabul that same year.¹²⁶ As an additional political compensation, and given that the US had indicated that NATO, rather than the US, should lead the headquarters in southern Afghanistan, the Canadian government sought to transfer its forces from Kabul to Kandahar. The political interest in making a substantial contribution to ISAF was complemented by how the Canadian Department of National Defence wanted to move away from the role of 'peacekeeper nation', as seen in the Balkan operations of the 1990s, which paved the way to Kandahar.¹²⁷ Canada's assumption of security responsibility for Kandahar, along with its PRT, from 2006 to 2011, was therefore driven more by political considerations and military ambitions in Ottawa than by an understanding of the developmental conditions and the Taliban's power position in southern Afghanistan. Similarly, the British contribution to Helmand and the PRT in Lashkar-Gah were politically employed as justification for an early military exit from Basra province in Iraq.¹²⁸ Since the invasion in 2003, the internal discussion regarding the legality of the Iraq invasion and the American failure to manage the security situation following the fall of Saddam Hussein had created significant political problems for the Blair government. Consequently, Blair required a means of extricating himself from the numerous miscalculations regarding Iraq. Southern Afghanistan provided both the government and British forces with a fresh start, focusing on delivering a cohesive and comprehensive effort, which also encompassed counter-narcotics within the SSR framework.¹²⁹ The UK had initially intended to send forces to Kandahar, but when Canada designated Kandahar province as a prerequisite for a larger troop contribution, the British found themselves early in the planning process with responsibility for Helmand province.¹³⁰ This simultaneously addressed the need to exit Iraq and establish the UK as a credible NATO partner, capitalising on historical relations with Pakistan while also providing a significant

contribution as the lead nation in an ISAF headquarters and a PRT in the more troubled southern Afghanistan.¹³¹

Other nations, such as Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands, which also opted to take responsibility for a PRT, faced a similar trade-off between foreign and domestic political considerations. Like the UK and Canada, the Netherlands assumed responsibility for a PRT and a military headquarters in one of Afghanistan's southern provinces (Uruzgan), focusing on the civilian effort in collaboration with Australia under its own 3D concept (Defence, Diplomacy and Development), emphasising the comprehensive approach to military, diplomatic and developmental initiatives.¹³² Public support withered as the security situation deteriorated, units in Uruzgan incurred more casualties, and the effects of the civilian development effort were lacking. Following a change in government, The Hague withdrew its troops by the end of 2010. Norway was influenced by NATO's expectations regarding the comprehensive approach to military and civilian efforts in the areas where military forces were deployed. Norway was among the numerous countries that grappled with value-based political difficulties concerning the greater integration of civilian initiatives into military operations. To prevent military involvement in civilian efforts, it was a political priority that Norwegian military units were assigned specific military tasks. This led Norway to assume responsibility in the more unstable Faryab province in 2004.¹³³ In that sense, several nations obtained their respective areas of operations for domestic political reasons while also aiming for their own development-policy ambitions. The consequence was that the allocation of operational areas was determined politically long before NATO's military staff had analysed the operational environment and devised a coherent and comprehensive campaign plan. Thus, Canada, the UK and the Netherlands had agreed on the ISAF expansion into southern Afghanistan long before the ISAF commander had designed the combination of military and civilian efforts in southern and eastern Afghanistan.¹³⁴

As a result of domestic and development policies in Western capitals, many concrete development projects were more frequently driven by political priorities than by actual conditions and deficiencies in Afghan localities.¹³⁵ In the multinational PRTs and military headquarters, overarching NATO strategies were often supplemented by the political agendas and performance indicators of contributing nations.¹³⁶ Countries that sought to maintain a strong humanitarian profile frequently bolstered development projects within their operational areas, leading to unwanted disparities across provinces and districts.¹³⁷ Consequently, the civilian effort over 20 years exhibited varying priorities both over time and among different Afghan regions.¹³⁸ A common characteristic of the civilian initiatives from several contributing nations was their lack of alignment with the Afghan central government's development and solidarity programmes.¹³⁹ In northern Afghanistan, where the security situation was initially better than elsewhere, initiatives often focused more on issues such as women's rights, girls' education and gender equality than in the more volatile regions, where security provision was paramount.¹⁴⁰ Overall, many nations' development programmes reflected Western values with clearly defined relationships between genders, perspectives on how justice should

be administered, and the role education should play in society.¹⁴¹ This resulted in both a local dependency on international assistance and a detachment from the Afghan central government. As the Taliban gained ground and the security situation worsened, the aid from donor countries disappeared together with many external actors and Afghan NGOs. This created space in which the Taliban could play a role.

In the absence of an institutionalised concept for coordinating civilian development projects and military deployments, each country practiced its own version of the CA.¹⁴² The various national approaches to integrating relevant actors in development projects therefore differed across Afghan regions, provinces and districts. In some areas, the civilian effort was dominant in both PRT management and the overall initiatives, while military operations were more prominent in others.¹⁴³ This contributed to the distortion of the international civilian effort and an overload of Afghan line ministries. Rather than developing long-term reform programmes for all of Afghanistan based on local conditions, under-resourced Afghan ministries were caught up in the development programmes of various nations targeted at specific provinces and districts.¹⁴⁴ This fragmentation adversely affected the overall efforts in areas such as health, education and gender equality, which were driven by the policy agendas and allocated budgets of donor countries.¹⁴⁵ In multinational PRTs and military headquarters, contributing nations were similarly tasked with optimising a sector within their own development policy frameworks, which undermined Afghan governance and local ownership in districts where the responsible nation was not focused.¹⁴⁶ Concurrently with this division of labour, an increasing number of private firms, NGOs and local contractors were employed to implement the development policy priorities of the involved nations. Despite donor countries designing project timelines and oversight programmes, the projects in provinces and districts were largely managed by private and local actors.¹⁴⁷ This undermined the authority of the Afghan central government and catalysed the rising corruption, as more local politicians and sub-contractors gained a share of the resources, often through client networks and bribery.¹⁴⁸

External dependency

The CA mindset also involved strengthening development cooperation between national and non-national actors, including the many national and local NGOs operating in Afghanistan. After the Taliban took power in 1996, several NGOs withdrew from Afghanistan due to their humanitarian principles being at odds with Taliban ideology.¹⁴⁹ From 1998 until 2001, there was a notable absence of NGO activity in Afghanistan, resulting in a significant development vacuum.¹⁵⁰ Following the fall of the Taliban in November 2001, international financial donations flooded into Afghanistan, attracting numerous NGOs with development experience.¹⁵¹ Well-educated Afghans who had fled the Taliban regime and possessed experience from international organisations and NGOs contributed to an explosion of Afghan NGOs and local branches of large NGOs from donor countries. Thus, development became not only a profession for individual exiled Afghans but also a substantial industry employing a growing segment of the population.¹⁵² This abundance of

actors, purpose-driven budgets and the need for local anchoring had both positive and negative impacts on Afghanistan's development. NGOs often had better local knowledge than national development initiatives, enabling them to deliver aid and health services more rapidly. The increase in active NGOs in Afghanistan aligned well with the PRT approach, as NGOs could provide services in the priority provincial and district areas.¹⁵³

However, this anchoring in the PRTs reinforced the tendency to overlook local ownership and Afghan traditions, as many donations had value-driven political objectives that were directly transferred to NGOs through budgets. Additionally, many development programmes and projects took place outside the Afghan government, which found it increasingly challenging to retain competent officials when salaries outside the ministries were significantly higher.¹⁵⁴ At times, the NGO sector employed up to 50,000 Afghans at salaries 20 times higher than those paid by the Afghan authorities.¹⁵⁵ Consequently, as many projects and services were delivered by both contract-bound and independent NGOs, the government struggled to garner support in local areas because the local population often felt that the improvements were being provided by actors other than the central administration.¹⁵⁶ Concurrently, substantial salaries and contracts flowed into Afghanistan through numerous private security and service companies that operated as part of international efforts. Particularly American, but also several European companies, saw growth potential in providing services to ISAF and UNAMA. The US Department of Defense is estimated to have spent \$108 billion on services purchased from private companies.¹⁵⁷

As the vast majority of aid funding originated from Western countries and donors, local NGOs often felt compelled to adopt the value-driven political objectives for the development.¹⁵⁸ Aid and development programmes throughout the 2000s were shaped by Western political ideals despite many donors operating under principles of neutrality, independence and non-discrimination in the allocation of funds.¹⁵⁹ Several national and local NGOs in Afghanistan shifted from a purely humanitarian agenda to also serving as subcontractors for the financial budgets and political priorities of the states involved.¹⁶⁰ In many PRTs, development policy programmes were built around the engagement of national NGOs that already received development funding from their respective contributing countries.¹⁶¹ Due to a lack of expertise and willingness to deploy civilian stabilisation advisers, increasing amounts of funding and projects were handed over to NGOs operating through Afghan branches in their respective areas of operations and responsibility.¹⁶² Collaboration between NGOs and government development authorities was often coordinated through separate organisations, frequently guided by value-driven political agendas.¹⁶³ This resulted in a form of politicisation of NGO work in Afghanistan, ultimately leading to their perception as a party in the conflict rather than as neutral practitioners of humanitarian efforts. Many NGOs quickly grew dependent on Western donors and appeared more as extensions of the contributing countries than as guardians of the humanitarian space. Even in areas where the security situation allowed for reasonably independent operations from military units, several NGOs served as government subcontractors.¹⁶⁴

Local governors, supported by PRTs and protected by ISAF, often allowed NGOs to deliver social services while they focused on securing their own power positions. This created a massive dependency on donor aid and assistance, extending even into the most remote district areas, making it nearly impossible to develop and expand the authority of the Afghan central government.¹⁶⁵ Even the NGOs that continued to operate within humanitarian principles challenged the legitimacy of the government, as they often failed to coordinate their development efforts with the Afghan government's priorities, including the national solidarity programme and development strategy.¹⁶⁶

The increasing use of external contractors to provide humanitarian assistance and implement development projects intensified the internal competition for financial resources among the many international organisations, foreign NGOs and Afghan NGOs.¹⁶⁷ As the funding for civilian efforts increased, NGOs found themselves in internal competition for money from both states and international donors.¹⁶⁸ The number of locally anchored and independent Afghan NGOs increased significantly throughout the 2000s, reflecting the establishment of a lucrative sector.¹⁶⁹ More and more projects were defined without a focus on long-term development.¹⁷⁰ In the education sector, for example, funds allocated and earmarked for the establishment of schools dictated their location, construction and size.¹⁷¹ Many school construction projects in Afghanistan adhered to the budgets and timelines set by donors. Consequently, numerous schools were built according to Western criteria for quality and accessibility, but as the security situation deteriorated, they were increasingly located in areas lacking the local capacity to manage and maintain them.¹⁷² Particularly the many resource-poor NGOs relied on large donors and thus operated more as subcontractors than as independent humanitarian organisations.¹⁷³ In the competition for financial resources, the same institutions and facilities were often funded multiple times by different donors, which also significantly contributed to the worsening corruption in Afghanistan.¹⁷⁴ In this way, many civilian and private contractors, as well as several local and Afghan NGOs, perpetuated the dependency on foreign support. The overall civilian effort contributed to increasing corruption, which did not legitimise the Afghan government; to the contrary. This contributed to the gradual emergence of space for the Taliban within the international effort in Afghanistan, which allowed them to compete for providing basic security and justice for the average Afghan. From a cultural perspective, basic physical security and justice had taken precedence over more than 20 years of war, overshadowing education, village development and access to health services, which were primarily provided by international efforts.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the major challenges facing civilian efforts over 20 years. Although sustainability, local ownership and the legitimisation of the Afghan central government were stipulated in the initial agreements concerning civilian development, specific donor interests, the deteriorating security situation, and increasing Afghan corruption and administrative incompetence meant that these initiatives

were characterised by their opposites: Short-termism, management according to external agendas and weakened support for the Afghan central government. What should have been a long-term and well-coordinated international effort based on Afghan ownership and pace instead materialised as a series of isolated, uncoordinated and often contradictory initiatives.

The first and greatest challenge facing the civilian efforts was the continuous need for security. The persistent security challenges became defining for civilian initiatives, particularly since the Taliban's resurgence from 2005 to 2006 onwards. This resulted in the civilian effort often comprising the so-called 'quick impact projects', which were intended to create legitimacy (and security) for international security forces. Despite ideals of better-coordinated stabilisation efforts, the intertwining of these efforts within the Afghan context ultimately meant that civilian initiatives had to support military security creation rather than the other way around. Initially, military security provision supported civilian efforts, which were first coordinated through the Afghan government, but this dynamic shifted as the Taliban grew stronger. Following NATO's expansion into eastern and southern Afghanistan in 2006, the civilian effort increasingly became about support for military operations. Funds were directed towards the most unstable areas, and development projects were often coordinated by the units present in the operational zones. This reinforced a short-term focus and further undermined the capacity of the Afghan government to provide its own solutions.

In addition to the security issues, the chapter secondly highlighted the lack of competent and available civilian development advisers, which meant that civilian efforts were effectively managed by military logics in the PRTs. From the top NATO military headquarters in Kabul to the smallest PRTs in the provinces, civilian advisers were scarce. When NATO implemented the CA concept and COIN doctrine from 2006 onwards, it is worth noting that there was only one civilian development adviser attached to the staff surrounding the US commander in ISAF. The absence of civilian advisers in many PRTs was primarily due to a lack of field experience and the general difficulty of deploying civilian officials to Afghanistan.

Thirdly, the chapter illuminated how civilian assistance was initially employed as a tool to build support for the central government, but paradoxically, over time it led to the opposite effect. The volume of funds exceeded conventional aid standards, and an excess of money contributed to the maintenance and escalation of corruption. Simultaneously, the majority of aid was provided off-budget; that is, outside the Afghan government, which further undermined its legitimacy and capacity for service delivery.

The fourth challenge highlighted in the chapter concerns the diminishing significance of local needs and Afghan ownership. Over time, the efforts became extremely supply-driven due to the national priorities of donor countries. This was equally true for the operations of NGOs, which competed for the same funds and had specific priorities that were not necessarily aligned with local needs. As ongoing corruption-related challenges resulted in the bulk of civilian aid being provided outside the central government, the overall picture was that Afghan ownership and demand effectively defined very little in relation to the agendas of external actors. Development projects in their operational areas often served

as an internal political lever to extend military contributions. Contributing countries increasingly employed their own national NGOs and their local Afghan branches. Moreover, more and more private companies were used as subcontractors for development and the security surrounding it. As this privatisation and ‘outsourcing’ of civilian efforts progressed, the Afghan government became less capable of delivering services, while corruption and nepotism pervaded the Afghan bureaucracy.

Finally, the chapter has illuminated the issues related to extreme donor dependency. The plethora of funds intended for use, despite a security situation that did not allow for it, resulted in the same projects being financed multiple times and the establishment of a lucrative sector that effectively operated independently of the central government. Local governors, supported by PRTs (and protected by ISAF), allowed the NGOs from donor countries to deliver social services, which created a donor and aid dependency that extended into the most remote district areas. Paradoxically, this worked against the development and expansion of the authority of the Afghan central government, as efforts became disconnected from the Afghan government’s development policy priorities.

Notes

- 1 Resolution, UN Security Council, ‘Resolution 1189’, 13 August 1998; Resolution, UN Security Council, ‘Resolution 1214’, 8 December 1998; Resolution, UN Security Council, ‘Resolution 1267’, 5 October 1999; Resolution, UN Security Council, ‘Resolution 1333’, 19 September 2000.
- 2 Resolution, UN Security Council, ‘Resolution 1378’, 14 November 2001.
- 3 Declaration, UN Secretary-General, ‘Letter dated 5 December 2001 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions’, 5 December 2001; Barnett R. Rubin (2020), *Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, p. 137.
- 4 Declaration, International Afghanistan Conference in Berlin, ‘31 March–01 April 2004: Berlin Conference Declaration’, 1 April 2004.
- 5 Rubin, *Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs*, p. 184.
- 6 Bjørn T. Godal et al., ‘En god alliert: Norge i Afghanistan 2001–2014’, Norges offentlige utredninger, 6 June 2016, p. 10; Tone Tingsgård, ‘Sverige i Afghanistan 2002–2014’, Statens offentliga utredningar, 2017, p. 58; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (2008), *Strategy for the Danish Engagement in Afghanistan 2008–2012*, p. 1.
- 7 Rubin, *Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs*, p. 185.
- 8 Thus, state-building was already embedded in the Bonn Agreement of December 2001, and following the London Conference in 2006, the frameworks for establishing a democratic state in Afghanistan were outlined in *The Afghanistan Compact*. Michael Clarke (2011), ‘The Helmand decision’, *Whitehall Papers*, 77(1), 10; Jonathan Goodhand and Mark Sedra (2010), ‘Who owns the peace? Aid, reconstruction, and peacebuilding in Afghanistan’, *Disasters* 34(1), 85; Resolution, UN Security Council, ‘Resolution 1386’, 20 December 2001.
- 9 For an overview of Afghan development plans, see Louise Riis Andersen (2016), *Afghanistan erfaringsopsamling 2001–2014 – Del I: Internationale erfaringer med samtænkning i Afghanistan*, DIIS, pp. 37–43.
- 10 Resolution, UNSC, ‘Resolution 1386’.

- 11 Andersen, *Afghanistan erfaringsopsamling 2001–2014 – Del I*, p. 31.
- 12 Andersen, *Afghanistan erfaringsopsamling 2001–2014 – Del I*, p. 24.
- 13 Rubin, *Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs*, pp. 180–185; Chuck Thiessen (2014), *Local Ownership of Peacebuilding in Afghanistan: Shouldering Responsibility for Sustainable Peace and Development*, Lexington Books, pp. 83–93.
- 14 The political agreements for the development of Afghanistan all indicate that the efforts were initially conceived as centralised state-building, but with external oversight. In this context, state-building should be viewed in relation to the ideals of development interventions, including the level of local ownership, the donor–recipient relationship, and the balance between development and security in the recipient country.
- 15 The New Humanitarian (2005), *Donor meeting reaffirms international commitment*.
- 16 Rubin, *Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs*, p. 190.
- 17 SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. experience in Afghanistan*, May 2018, p. 58; Paul Fishstein and Andrew Wilder, ‘Winning hearts and minds? Examining the relationship between aid and security in Afghanistan’, Feinstein International Center, April 2011p. 23.
- 18 For an overview of the PRTs, see Andersen, *Afghanistan erfaringsopsamling 2001–2014 – Del I*, pp. 45–53.
- 19 Peter Viggo Jakobsen (2005), *PRTs in Afghanistan: Successful but not sufficient*, DIIS, p. 11; Stanley Sloan, ‘NATO in Afghanistan’, UNISCI Discussion Papers, January 2010, p. 37; Andersen, *Afghanistan erfaringsopsamling 2001–2014 – Del I*, pp. 46–48.
- 20 From 2001 to 2003, ISAF was a coalition of willing contributing nations, initially led by the UK and later under Turkish and German leadership.
- 21 Resolution, UN Security Council, ‘Resolution 1510’, 13 October 2003.
- 22 Rubin, *Afghanistan: What Everyone Needs*, p. 186.
- 23 Roya Rahmani (2012), ‘Donors, beneficiaries, or NGOs: Whose needs come first? A dilemma in Afghanistan’, *Development in Practice* 22(3), 295–304.
- 24 SIGAR, *Divided responsibility: Lessons from U.S. security sector assistance efforts in Afghanistan*, July 2019, p. 120.
- 25 Goodhand and Sedra, ‘Who owns the peace?’, p. 85; Andersen, *Afghanistan erfaringsopsamling 2001–2014 – Del I*, p. 38.
- 26 SIGAR, *What we need to learn: Lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction*, August 2021, p. 24.
- 27 SIGAR, *Stabilization: Lessons*, p. 13.
- 28 SIGAR, *What we need to learn*, p. 27. The US focused much of its aid on infrastructure rather than on political and administrative capacity building. However, the US also supported the World Bank’s Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), which worked on administrative capacity development. See ARTF (n.d.), *Afghanistan Resilience Trust Fund: An Overview*.
- 29 Goodhand and Sedra, ‘Who owns the peace?’, p. 89; Andersen, *Afghanistan erfaringsopsamling 2001–2014 – Del I*, pp. 38–40.
- 30 Godal et al., ‘En god alliert’, p. 23.
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7 Conclusion

What Can We Learn from the War in Afghanistan?

This book has highlighted five factors, each representing developmental trajectories and clusters of challenges that together provide insight into why the Taliban were able to regain power in Afghanistan in August 2021. These factors are presented in five chapters, which describe the following: (1) the strength and strategy of the Taliban, (2) the negotiations with the Taliban that led to the withdrawal, (3) the American war in Afghanistan, particularly the initial decisions made, (4) the challenges in military capacity building, and (5) the challenges in civil capacity building. A brief summary of the chapters is presented in the introduction, and the main points are outlined in the conclusions at the end of each chapter.

This concluding chapter consists of two parts: A brief summarising section and a slightly longer ‘lessons learned’ section. In the first part, we look across the chapters and present the explanations for why the Taliban regained power. The second part of the chapter continues to examine the five chapters and identifies five overarching problem complexes that have proven to be fundamental challenges and thus relevant for understanding the development and outcome of the war. These five problem complexes are highlighted because they hold significance *beyond* the Afghan context and may prove useful in future situations where Danish policymakers must decide on international interventions. The lessons learned, which are presented in the final part, are structured around these five problem complexes.

Why did the Taliban regain power?

As described in the introduction and throughout this book, explanations vary as to why the war in Afghanistan concluded with the Taliban re-taking the country. In policy debates and the public discourse immediately following the Taliban’s return to power, two particular explanations circulated, which continue to pop up in the political debate. Firstly, it was posited that the West had attempted to assist the Afghans in building a better state but that, due to cultural factors (not least corruption) and the incompetence of the Kabul government, the Afghans were not receptive to help. Secondly, it was argued that the main cause could be found in neighbouring Pakistan, which, from the outset of the war, played a duplicitous role by pretending to cooperate with the US and the coalition while simultaneously supporting the Taliban. Both explanations overemphasise the significance of the

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elements they portray as decisive: Afghan culture and Pakistani double-dealing. As this book has demonstrated, the Afghan government was indeed marked by corruption and a myriad of challenges to legitimacy, and Pakistan also played an ambiguous role, balancing its own security interests with its position as a US ally in the War on Terror.

As this book illustrates, however, the local and regional conditions are insufficient explanations for the outcome of the war. The decisions made by the intervening countries, particularly the United States, better explain why the Taliban were able to regain power *despite the prolonged presence and capacity-building efforts*. There were fundamental conditions in Afghanistan (e.g., poverty, high levels of illiteracy, a significant Cold War history) that interacted with the manner of intervention, the decisions taken – including those regarding the factions with which NATO and the Americans allied – the implementation of various capacity-building initiatives, and how funds were utilised. At the same time, Pakistan acted primarily – and, *ceteris paribus*, predictably – based on its own security interests, even though the country was largely subject to the American agenda. This included allowing the US drone programme to operate in Pakistan beginning in 2004, deploying the Pakistani military into tribal areas at the onset of the war, and releasing one of the Taliban's key founders, Mullah Baradar, whom the US had designated as its dialogue partner in Doha.

Corruption and political fragmentation were both well-known problems in Afghanistan, but also problems that the international civil aid and the manner in which 'democratisation' was implemented contributed to exacerbating and amplifying. The Afghan and regional contexts thus represented fundamental conditions that the intervention efforts had to navigate and manage. Oversimplified readings of who was 'to blame' for the outcome, much like the two explanations mentioned above that circulate in public debate, risk conflating the conditions in Afghanistan (conditions that should largely have been part of the equation when the intervention was decided and planned) with a critical evaluation of why the intervention efforts failed. At the same time, they risk minimising the significance of the room for manoeuvre of the involved and intervening parties (including smaller countries like Denmark), as 'blame' is placed on the exotic, the foreign and the distant. Ultimately, this shifts the responsibility for an intervention in which our elected representatives chose to participate for 20 years. The actions of Pakistan and the Afghan elite do not explain why the Taliban were able to seize power *despite* the 20 years of massive US and NATO military and civilian involvement in the country, which this book has aimed to address. Here, attention must turn inward to how the efforts were managed, given what was known – or learned along the way – about the Afghan and regional context.

This book has established that there is, after all, no simple answer to why the Taliban were able to continue gaining strength and ultimately regain power; and consequently, there was no straightforward solution to the gradually deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. However, this book has also demonstrated that the manner in which the interventions were implemented – both military and civil capacity-building efforts – ultimately exacerbated some of the fundamental

challenges in Afghanistan. This is particularly noteworthy and calls for reflection and learning.

Based on our analyses in the main chapters of this book, the Taliban takeover can be explained with reference to a variety of interrelated factors that support one another. We have shown how challenges in one area often had a spillover effect on others, resulting in a cycle of problems perpetually feeding back into one another.

Why, then, were the Taliban able to regain power?

- Because the Taliban were a more competent and strategic actor than previously believed. The Taliban's success can be explained by their ability to mobilise, their adaptability and their internal discipline. Additionally, they allied with the Haqqani network and exploited their strengthened position following the Doha Agreement with the Americans. In hindsight, the capabilities and strategy of the Taliban were either underestimated, misinterpreted or deemed irrelevant.
- Because it was solely during the first phase of the war that the focus was on preventing the Taliban from regaining power. Already by 2011 – halfway through the war – there was a shift in the approach to the Taliban; from that point on, the Americans moved away from the objective of defeating the Taliban. The international effort transitioned from attacking the Taliban to defending against them. From that moment, they increasingly came to be regarded by both the Americans and regional neighbours as an unavoidable actor in the future of Afghanistan. Consequently, the international effort in the War on Terror became increasingly ambivalent and unclear regarding the objectives of the war and who the actual enemy was; from the shared purpose being easier to see in the start of the war to the intervention effort gradually becoming a mishmash of multiple missions.¹
- Because the establishment of sustainable state institutions, democracy and gender equality – meant to serve as a bulwark against the Taliban – *was not* a primary priority. This was evident both in terms of financial resources and the actual efforts on the ground, despite civil development being a key flagship issue for several contributing countries. Instead, the focus was largely dictated by the critical security situation that was already unfolding in the early years of the war (2005–06). And paradoxically, many of the decisions and reservations among the intervening countries regarding the organisation of civil aid worked *against* the strengthening of Afghan state institutions and democracy. Although democracy, a new constitution and free elections were formally established, many of these processes ultimately proved undemocratic as they failed to ensure representation and were characterised by nepotism, corruption and clientalism. Both the Americans and Afghanistan's neighbouring countries sought to secure their influence through those individuals with whom they could best cooperate. Simultaneously, the efforts were so fragmented that nobody took responsibility for the overall development, despite independent evaluations highlighting the problems along the way.

- Because there were coinciding events, particularly the war in Iraq, that distracted attention from Afghanistan. In the early stages of the war, the Americans believed that it had been won, but the Taliban had reorganised and gradually gained ground from 2005. Around the same time that NATO transitioned to Resolute Support Mission (RSM), the Islamic State (IS) emerged in Afghanistan, altering a number of strategic interests for both the US and regional actors, with the Taliban being viewed as a 'partner' against the global and regional threat posed by IS.
- Because the Americans made an agreement (Doha) with the Taliban without simultaneously establishing a national peace process that could have prevented the formation of the narrow Taliban cabinet that seized power in 2021. Exit pressure was already mounting in the US during Obama's presidency, with preparations for withdrawal beginning as early as 2011. Simultaneously, with a few exceptions, there was insufficient focus among the other coalition countries on peace diplomacy or on creating a representative government in Afghanistan.
- Because Pakistan's security interests, along with those of the other neighbouring countries, provided the Taliban with leeway, including both direct and indirect resources. The regional actors' interests ultimately benefited the Taliban, which gradually expanded their scope for action, even though these regional actors initially supported the War on Terror. The moment Afghanistan's neighbouring countries observed that the Americans were planning to withdraw, the contest to secure influence in the future of Afghanistan began. From that point onward – 2011 and beyond – the Taliban emerged as an unavoidable actor in the future of Afghanistan. With the rise of Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) in 2015, the incentive to maintain good relations with the Taliban increased, and Trump also expressed interest in a counterterrorism partnership with them.
- Because capacity building – both military and civilian – suffered from short-termism, a lack of ownership and inadequate coordination, despite claims to the contrary. Capacity building was aimed at establishing sustainable democratic institutions and a security sector that could ideally serve as a bulwark against the return of the Taliban. This book has described how capacity building was hindered by ongoing security challenges, a lack of competencies and national caveats among the contributing countries. Simultaneously, capacity building was subjected to the American focus on counterterrorism with the fewest possible *boots on the ground*, even though it ultimately proved impossible to keep troop numbers down throughout the entire period, despite political ambitions to do so.
- Because the Afghan government suffered from legitimacy challenges that the Taliban could exploit. The Taliban were able to mobilise support by capitalising on the lengthy foreign presence and the various scandals that emerged along the way, including the treatment of Guantanamo detainees, civilian casualties, incidents of Quran desecration, the Muhammad cartoons crisis, WikiLeaks, cases regarding the conduct of Afghan police authorities, and allegations connecting the political elite to nepotism, corruption and brutality by militias that had not been disarmed.

- Because the grand American ambitions for a swift regime change, the elimination of the Taliban and the establishment of a secure, stable and democratic Afghanistan as a bulwark against al-Qaeda operating from the country were not matched by realistic planning based on solid knowledge of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. A significant reason for this was that the George W. Bush administration was under immense pressure to act following 9/11 and did not maintain full focus on the war in Afghanistan, viewing it merely as part of the War on Terror, including the Iraq War. The rapid dissolution of the Taliban regime led the US to the erroneous conclusion that the war had already been won before it had truly begun. It was during the planning and commencement of the war that the seeds of a failed campaign were sown, and the endgame involved the US allowing the Taliban to set the terms for the American exit, thereby enabling them to regain power.²

Lessons learned – Five problem complexes

What can the conclusions regarding the processes and conditions that led to the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan teach us when making future decisions about participation in international missions? According to the terms of reference for the inquiry report upon which this book is based: ‘A central aim of the inquiry will be to identify relevant learning points that may be valuable for future decisions related to ongoing and forthcoming Danish military and civilian contributions to international efforts. This includes the fundamental question of how the Taliban were able to regain power in Afghanistan after 20 years of substantial international civilian and military engagement in the country’. More specifically, the purpose has been to ‘assess and evaluate Denmark’s efforts with a view to learning for considerations regarding future peace, stabilisation and reconstruction efforts’.³

However, translating the terms of reference into actionable learning necessitates four preliminary clarifications, which are elaborated upon in greater detail in an annex on the principles for learning ([Appendix](#)).

The first concerns the **transferability** of insights to future missions. Specific Afghan conditions (political culture, history, geography, economy, etc.) may render certain learning points less relevant in the future. Conversely, as we cannot anticipate the conditions that will apply to upcoming missions, we make no attempt at qualifying or grading their future relevance, instead extracting possible learning points from Afghanistan that future decision-makers ought to assess in the context of a new situation. The degree of generalisability applies not only to specific Afghan circumstances but also to characteristics related to the unique political situation following the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the US on 11 September 2001, which exerted an unusually high pressure on American leadership to respond decisively and on their allies to follow suit. Thus, the war was not ‘merely’ shaped by a particular geographical, political and cultural context (the Afghan context); rather, 9/11 represented a unique historical moment that narrowed the range of available options.

The second clarification is that the experiences from the War in Afghanistan can be linked to different **phases**: The decision to initiate the war (including its planning and commencement); its specific implementation, including ongoing

adjustments; and finally, its conclusion. The first type of question that arises, therefore, is whether the decision should have been: '*Don't!*' – and consequently, how we can improve our ability to avoid futile engagements in the future. The second type of question concerns the broad range of decisions regarding how the war should have been approached. Finally, the third type of question relates to the ability to detect warning signs indicating that the operation was on a course requiring fundamental reassessment or termination.

A third clarification is that a smaller portion of the learning presented in this book **can be attributed directly or specifically to Denmark** in the sense that it pertains solely to Denmark or that Denmark alone could have influenced the outcome of the war. Obviously, Denmark did not have control over the entire international involvement. Nevertheless, particularly as one of the closest US allies at the time, Denmark had an opportunity to exercise influence and had a shared responsibility. The relevant questions for Denmark in the future will exactly concern participation in operations where it cannot dictate the tempo or course of action, and learning should therefore also centre on the methods and principles of participating in international operations, as such.⁴

The fourth, final and most challenging clarification is that there is a distinction between whether the identified 'mistakes' are isolated factors that can potentially be corrected or whether they are instead **systemic and structural problems**. Some of our learning points highlight manageable issues in the sense that the insights gained from experience could lead to better ways of doing things and better outcomes. However, other points address problems and dilemmas that are systematically and inevitably created in international efforts of this nature, and thus, at best, we may become better at resisting them or be more consciously aware of them when deciding to contribute to such international efforts.

This fourth clarification provides an important framework for the overall learning endeavour, as there is an inherent risk that '*Lessons Learned*' reports like the one upon which this book is based may instil a false sense of security and optimism that '*now we know how to proceed, and if we intervene again with this enhanced understanding, success will follow*'. However, this book generally indicates that despite a number of adjustments indeed being made along the way, they still failed to yield a different outcome. While it is possible to derive significant learning points from the War in Afghanistan that could be crucial in a future context, this is not to say that we have learned how that war could have been won. On the contrary, some of the most critical insights point to obstacles that followed inevitably from very early decisions – and for which simple solutions never emerged.

The following pages therefore describe *learning points* that can be used in the future as a 'warning checklist' that should not be overlooked when decisions are made regarding Danish participation in international missions, without implying that there is now a manual for ensuring successful interventions.

The learning points have been extracted based on themes that recur across the chapters, and are outlined here as five problem complexes under the headings: (1) knowledge disconnect, (2) fragmentation, (3) civil–military (im)balance, (4) peace in war and (5) legitimacy.

After describing what the general problem complex encompasses, we provide brief examples of the problem based on the main analyses of the book (chapters 2–6) before presenting the actual learning points. The first problem complex receives more attention than the others, as it appears to be the most multifaceted and pervasive throughout the course of the war. This is therefore the area where the warning signals for a democratic society based on the rule of law should be blinking brightest.

Knowledge disconnect

This book has documented several instances where there *was* knowledge or an overview could have been established, demonstrating that developments on the ground were failing: The Taliban were advancing, and there were challenges with military capacity building. Despite awareness of the strength of the Taliban, the Americans chose nevertheless to negotiate. Similarly, despite reports indicating that the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) were not prepared, NATO still opted to transfer security responsibility. Moreover, even though corruption and brutality among local allies were known issues, both the US and NATO chose and continued to collaborate with them. Knowledge was thus disconnected from decision-making in critical areas.⁵

In addition to decisions being made without due consideration to the knowledge (about the situation in Afghanistan), this book has also highlighted significant instances – particularly in the early years – where there *was* a genuine knowledge deficit. This was especially problematic in relation to the concrete implementation of intervention efforts.⁶ Finally, the book has revealed how, regardless of whether sufficient knowledge existed or was disregarded, there was an issue with how the intervening countries measured and reported success; and what was considered relevant to know. The contributing nations had access to extensive knowledge about Afghanistan, yet specific benchmarks and metrics for success led to the filtering out of relevant information.

In the planning and beginning of the war; the scope for knowledge and alternatives became narrowly constrained

In the high-pressure context following 9/11, the prevailing expectation was for a rapid and massive military response. But there *were* alternatives. More realistic and nuanced considerations could have led to a less ambitious but potentially more effective approach, such as a direct focus on combating al-Qaeda rather than pursuing regime change. As we have outlined, the chosen plan was promptly criticised for aiming too high while delivering too little. More time for planning could have potentially resulted in a more measured strategy without the ‘gaps in the plan’ (such as the challenges associated with the Northern Alliance and the political and security situation in Kabul post-regime change), which the American war cabinet was aware of but failed take into account. As the book in hand has described, the decision to go to war was made in an environment characterised by exaggerated

perceptions of an acute terrorist threat. In Washington, it became a goal in itself to demonstrate resolve through military action in Afghanistan – a significant signal in the War on Terror – despite the absence of a realistic strategy for countering the al-Qaeda network.⁷

The decision to combat international terrorism through the initial decision for a regime change operation and international intervention had significant consequences for the Afghan people and neighbouring countries (including the high civilian death toll). Global terrorism did fluctuate but did not disappear, and – measured in quantitative terms – it was strengthened after 2001.⁸

The Taliban were consistently underestimated

As highlighted above, there was a significant gap between, on one side, how the Taliban were evolving and the publicly available knowledge (primarily in academic circles, among independent analysts associated with organisations such as SIGAR, AAN or *Long War Journal*, as well as in publicly accessible threat and risk assessments, including in Denmark from the Danish Security and Intelligence Service) versus, on the other side, the surprise expressed by the Western public at the Taliban's takeover of power. The developments would have been less surprising had there been an open and critical debate regarding the publicly available knowledge regarding the Taliban's resurgence, combat activities and control.

While this can be viewed as a consequence of the misinterpretation of having defeated the Taliban in the initial phase of the war, our own analysis of the Taliban also indicates that the nature of their power was likely underestimated. Since the 1990s, the Taliban represented a segment of the population and had been part of local governance – also throughout the 20-year period – not least because the regime in Kabul struggled with massive legitimacy issues. Local dynamics would not appear to have been given significant importance due to Western understandings of state legitimacy and an underestimation of the significance of local power structures, informal authority and legitimacy. The Taliban were not sufficiently understood as a cohesive entity or as a strategically acting actor. A continuous overview, such as the one we have presented in this book, could have been constructed in real time. Paradoxically, the Taliban were portrayed both as a menacing, mysterious opponent and simultaneously underestimated as a cohesive insurgent movement and as a segment of the population. Whether the lack of a holistic view stemmed from a (value-)political reluctance to acknowledge the Taliban as an effective military and political force or whether the reality of the Taliban's resilience was politically inconvenient to communicate in the public spheres of the involved countries cannot be determined in this book based on the available evidence.

The fight against al-Qaeda – the primary objective – faded into the background

Particularly in light of the fact that it was al-Qaeda that executed the 9/11 attacks and was initially viewed as the principal enemy, this focus was significantly

downplayed from the outset of the war on 7 October 2001. Although al-Qaeda jihadists were arrested, cave complexes in Tora Bora were bombed, and Operation Anaconda was conducted in 2002, the emphasis was much more on the Taliban.

The limited understanding of both al-Qaeda's strength and organisation (including its capabilities regarding weapons of mass destruction) and the relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban led to hasty decisions. From the outbreak of the war, the Taliban and al-Qaeda were interpreted as identical entities, despite not being so. In reality, the resulting regime change strategy effectively created the Taliban as an insurgent movement. If al-Qaeda was the main enemy, this was a highly illogical strategy. Many scholars have pointed to the likely explanation that the US military primarily had experience in combating state and regime actors (e.g., the Taliban), while non-state networks (e.g., al-Qaeda) were more challenging to 'translate' into attack targets. Historically, nationally grounded insurgencies are also among the most difficult to fight, as the US itself had previously experienced during the Vietnam War. Furthermore, the concrete lessons from both the British and Soviet defeats in Afghanistan could have served as warnings that the war was not won simply by toppling the Taliban regime, but rather marked the beginning of a protracted insurgency involving guerrilla warfare and terrorism.

Expenditures and timelines were defining factors – rather than assessments of efficacy

This book has described how it was not the developments in Afghanistan that mattered, but rather the fulfilment of the national benchmarks of the contributing countries, such as financial expenditures, the number of schoolbooks procured, or other 'checklist' indicators, against which progress was measured and reported. It is easier to measure and document actions taken than to assess actual outcomes, and politicians often appear more accountable if they can demonstrate short-term progress. The typical shift from measuring outputs to inputs is not solely a problem associated with political and bureaucratic logic; it also presents a genuine dilemma. While focusing on inputs can typically be done quite accurately, it merely serves as an indirect – and often imprecise – indicator of what is truly of interest: The effect. The alternative is to report on 'how things are going', which is sufficiently vague to allow for easy claims of 'progress', which fosters false optimism. As described below, the challenge in Afghanistan was also that the many and unclear objectives of the war rendered it difficult to establish meaningful indicators of success.

Learning regarding disconnected knowledge

- **Openness to uncomfortable knowledge.** Knowledge, including uncomfortable truths and awareness of alternative courses of action, should be integrated in both the decision-making phase and the ongoing process. It is also crucial to the learning process that an adversary is assessed realistically, despite the ideological, moral and cultural filters.

- **Focus on the use of benchmarks.** There should be an emphasis on the metrics used by decision-makers to define success, including how they measure progress, as this knowledge is fundamental for evaluating advancement. For example, financial expenditure is not a relevant criterion for assessing the effectiveness of a decision on the ground. The number of school buildings constructed is not a relevant success criterion if those same buildings lie in ruins shortly after they are built or if the classrooms are empty. Decision-makers should strive to avoid these inappropriate approaches, remain vigilant about their tendency to creep back in, and be aware of how they contribute to an inaccurate portrayal of reality. The solution involves opening up to the use of competing information systems and measurement methods, which provides decision-makers with a more realistic picture of actual progress or the lack thereof in relation to the overarching objectives.
- **Feedback from reality to the political system.** There should be a focus on avoiding bureaucratic reporting procedures or other knowledge gaps that hinder insights into the status concerning the overarching goals of the war.
- **Concrete mechanisms to raise warning signals.** In politics, it is often problematic to admit mistakes – particularly in wartime, where there is persistent temptation to portray any criticism as unpatriotic or disrespectful towards those deployed.⁹ The employees in various systems typically have career motivations to withhold unpopular knowledge, and politicians, along with the political-administrative system, often have narrower perceptions of what is deemed ‘relevant’ to know compared to experts. Thus, it is insufficient merely to eliminate specific sources of error and trust that information flows freely; it is necessary to proactively install warning systems. This may involve consultations, briefings and other mechanisms that ensure close contact between decision-makers, frontline practitioners/deployed personnel and researchers to facilitate direct, unfiltered and impartial information exchange rather than just bureaucratic reporting. It is especially important to institutionalise communication channels that ensure uncomfortable insights are not filtered out.
- **Readiness for alternatives, consequences and scenarios.** It is absolutely essential to be aware of alternatives – alternative courses of action – and to conduct ‘impact assessments’ involving expert knowledge while measuring relevant parameters. From a learning perspective, decision-makers should have a general research and knowledge-based as preparedness to obtain independent information quickly when a particular area suddenly rises to prominence on the political agenda.
- **Obligation to inform.** For decision-makers (government and parliament), it is central to ensure democratic transparency regarding the actual developments, including first ensuring that they themselves are informed not only about whether allocated funds have been spent but also about whether they have contributed to the desired effect.

Fragmentation

Our investigation has mapped out how Afghanistan became an arena for a multitude of competing agendas and objectives, including counterterrorism,

counterinsurgency, state-building and capacity building. Concurrently, there were various competing actors within the coalition: Local actors with their own agendas (who often sought to maximise the benefits of international aid), regional actors (with their own geopolitical, economic and security agendas) and different forums (e.g., the UN, NATO and the EU). Even within individual contributing countries, there were actors pulling in different directions characterised by differences between those who were closely engaged with the realities in Afghanistan and those situated in government corridors in the West.

This book has highlighted the lack of coordination and coherence, along with a high degree of fragmentation, as significant problems regarding the ability to follow through on initiatives, to take responsibility for the progress of the respective missions, and to measure advancement in Afghanistan in a way that could have provided a more realistic understanding of the situation on the ground.

The national reservations meant that the responsibility for development became diffuse

A significant issue in capacity building was that the various initiatives – despite the dominant role of the United States – were not coordinated, dictated instead by the restrictions and varying objectives of the contributing countries. This is not an Afghanistan-specific problem; in an international operation of this nature, partner nations will often have ‘national reservations’ or restrictions that complicate alignment and coordination, and these concerns often run deep, both historically and politically. Nevertheless, involvement in Afghanistan exemplified to an extreme degree how national interests and differences can hinder the original objectives. In particular, the chapters on military and civilian capacity building have illustrated how various activities effectively undermined the initial goals (counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, capacity building), indicating that the pluralism among coalition countries and differences in implementing capacity building are not without challenges. Absolute clarity regarding responsibility for progress, especially concerning the capacity building of the ANDSF, posed a significant challenge, and accountability, as described in this book, became increasingly muddled in the course of the process.

The purposes of the war – too many, unclear and constantly changing

Particularly in a ‘messily justified’ war such as the one in Afghanistan, many different objectives typically converge into an unstable mixture. In principle, this could be seen as positive, reflecting a process of learning and adaptation to actual experiences. As this book demonstrates, however, this instead devolved into a zigzag course that ultimately brought the Taliban back to power. Although the initial occasion was clear – the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States – the justifications for intervening in Afghanistan shifted over time. Numerous different objectives were articulated across the involved countries, and according to a particular political logic, a war garnering support from diverse groups can

be perceived as a strength: Here, from the neo-conservative hawks' interest in enhancing American power to the concerns of otherwise war-sceptical feminists regarding the plight of Afghan women and girls. As we have shown, however, the war in Afghanistan – and the manner in which it concluded – was characterised by a tension between one faction that sought to develop Afghanistan and another for whom Afghanistan was merely a comma in the broader War on Terror. This tension led to confusion regarding direction, and the differences in objectives pulled in opposite directions.

The US made the critical decisions

This book highlights significant fluctuations from the US side between unilateral and multilateral approaches in Afghanistan. American unilateralism meant that NATO often neither functioned as a coordinated nor coordinating actor. Unilateral American decisions shaped the War in Afghanistan, particularly the endgame and negotiations with the Taliban.

Learning, fragmentation

- **The advantage of fewer objectives and agendas in international operations.** As a participant in international efforts, where numerous competing actors are already involved, there should be an emphasis on simplification and limited levels of ambition, accompanied by a clear division of responsibilities. One lesson from the fragmented engagement is that Denmark should strive to foster a higher degree of international coherence.¹⁰ At the same time, ambiguities regarding the objectives must be addressed openly. In the short term, a multiplicity of objectives can often seem beneficial, as it creates a broader political coalition within the individual intervening countries and helps to avoid international controversies among partner nations. However, fragmentation and ambiguities lead to numerous specific problems, as illustrated above, and contribute to the initial problem complex surrounding knowledge, because unclear goals make it more challenging to identify worrying developments. Future operations should therefore focus on achieving the greatest possible clarity regarding objectives.
- **Analysis of internal coalition dynamics and processes.** In deciding to engage in an international effort, a realistic analysis should be conducted not only of the 'recipient country' but also of the 'sending group'. It is important to analyse the international context regarding the types of collaborative relationships and coalitions that exist around the US, and similarly to assess how focused the American political system is at a given time, as its internal tensions and blockages can impede foreign policy that aligns with the goals and principles of a smaller ally, like Denmark. In principle, the internal contradictions within the US can be an argument for participation, as demonstrated by the Nyrop Rasmussen government, which was aware of the need to influence the US by participating so as to avoid it becoming isolated and

thereby potentially heading off in a more problematic direction. Incorporating a ‘US analysis’ into the decision-making framework therefore makes sense. Many analyses are received *from* the US, but analyses *of* the US are rarely conducted; and, especially, a realistic understanding of the US – despite dependence on its role – seldom informs Danish foreign policy decisions. Furthermore, contributing countries should ensure that NATO acts as an alliance and is not entirely dominated by the American agenda.

- **Principles at the forefront and a Nordic approach.** The United States was the primary alliance partner in Afghanistan, underscored by the fact that the operation was triggered by an attack on the US. The allies focused their efforts on upholding NATO’s musketeer oath (an attack on one NATO member is considered an attack on all, as outlined in Article 5 of the alliance treaty). As part of the lessons learned from Afghanistan, decision-makers should consider closer Nordic cooperation, alternative alliance formations, and establish some principles for participation in and withdrawal from interventions.

Civil–military (im)balance

This book has documented how the relationship between civil and military actors in missions that involve both defeating an enemy and building a society is, unsurprisingly, fraught with tension. Civil actors were subjected to a security policy agenda, while development projects were undermined by a lack of security. Although the ideal of being holistic and coordinated across sectors is appealing, a challenging dilemma exists: While long-term security cannot be established without development, development projects cannot be initiated without a minimum level of security. In the Afghan context, security challenges defined the framework for the civil effort, which was therefore subordinate to security logics. Moreover, the absence of a negotiated political agreement among the key parties in Afghanistan was decisive in shaping the security–development relationship. Many of the well-known principles and guidelines for effective Security Sector Reform (SSR) are predicated on the existence of an agreement or peace to implement, which was not the case in Afghanistan.

Military capacity building dominated by short-term security concerns

As this book has highlighted, capacity building in Afghanistan was originally embedded in the creation of security. It was first explicitly recognised as an independent task only in 2015. Even then, however, the training was not long-term, as it did not address Afghan needs and remained of a general nature. The problem was that it was structured and defined on the basis of the restrictions imposed by the contributing countries and their different national limitations – not an assessment of local needs.¹¹

Similar experiences with how military capacity building is challenging, even when declared to be a central goal, have also been observed in other international contexts, not least in the Vietnam War. However, it is important to note that short-term considerations in war are not merely isolated errors. There is a self-reinforcing

dynamic in an international operation like the Afghanistan mission that tends to prioritise short-term security concerns over long-term training. It is inherent to the nature of war that one cannot justify choosing an approach one considers less optimal in the current relationship with an adversary – risking military losses or defeat based on broader considerations. Introducing locally adapted approaches is also difficult. Military institutions have strong internal organisations with established procedures, making it complicated for entities such as the US military to operate according to Afghan formats and traditions. Thus, while it may initially seem perplexing that efforts were made to train Afghan forces based on American methods of combat and organisation rather than local practices, it is also quite challenging to avoid persistent pressure in that direction. The US actually had procedures for ongoing assessments and recommendations throughout most of the period – SIGAR – so the fact that this did not yield better results illustrates both how difficult it is to deviate from standard procedures and the critical importance of the early phase, as an intensifying conflict generates increasing pressure towards a purely military logic.

Military considerations trumped the civil effort

The predominance of security concerns resulted from the Americans generally leaning towards a ‘security-first’ strategy. Broad research in peacebuilding advocates that one starts with state-building, ensuring security for the population. However, the nature of the War in Afghanistan war was from the outset tied to dubious local partners, which pushed international actors towards assisting local power centres to secure themselves against the population. Even with a focus on the Kabul government as the legitimate authority, locally, the US and NATO were dependent on authorities that lacked the trust of the populace.

Ensuring that development assistance benefits local populations is rarely a simple matter; and doing so at an accelerated pace under complex political conditions, such as those in Afghanistan, is particularly difficult. In Afghanistan, several obstacles were present: The Taliban deliberately acted to sabotage civilian targets that played a strategic role in the state-building project. Development organisations often emphasised how operating in a framework defined by the ‘comprehensive’ thinking, where they became hostages to a military strategy, was problematic. Implementing a ‘security first, then everything else’ approach was impossible, because the security situation was never brought under control. Simultaneously, the ‘development-first’ strategy was always incomplete, as even the ‘most civil’ actors required protection. This dilemma should always be acknowledged, but it became especially intractable in Afghanistan due to the absence of peacebuilding among different Afghan parties (the conflict was not simply the Taliban versus the government; internally, there were periods of continuous conflicts and hostilities within the Afghan government itself).

The comprehensive approach was not the most obvious doctrine in Afghanistan

NATO embraced the comprehensive approach (CA) in 2008, and Denmark advocated internationally for the comprehensive (*samtænkt*) approach as (our)

concept.¹² It may have been precisely this advocacy that rendered it particularly challenging in Denmark to see where the doctrine had its limitations.¹³ Three insights are especially important. First and foremost, the comprehensive approach did not actually imply balanced integration; rather, it placed military logic at the centre and then worked to integrate the civil elements. Secondly, a liberal-democratic state (in keeping with the Western model) came to represent the ideal for both civil and military development – not local traditions. Thirdly, the CA effectively resulted in an elevation of local NGOs outside the Afghan state, further undermining the central government's limited legitimacy. In practice, the outsourcing of both security and development meant that considerations for a sustainable Afghan state were not paramount. Instead, across Afghanistan, the comprehensive approach created very fragile – and externally dependent – parallel societies.

Learning, civil–military (im)balance

- **Civil–military integration as part of a comprehensive approach may sound better than it works.** There should be political awareness regarding situations where military and civil involvement should be separated, as well as in which scenarios a coordinated effort makes sense and, if so, how such an effort can be implemented concretely. For instance, the largest Danish attempt to gather ‘lessons learned’ from Afghanistan¹⁴ was defined relatively narrowly within the CA framework (the focus was on learning how to optimise integration, but the fundamental political project was not included as part of the mandate). In future operations, it is crucial to pose fundamental questions and to be very clear about the inherent tensions, explicitly protecting both long-term objectives and civil contributions. A significant argument for separating efforts in light of the experience in Afghanistan is that CA did not benefit the Afghan people; rather, civil aid became a short-term military instrument. Improved coordination across ministries/sectors (which can be a good idea) is not the same as using civil development funds to promote military victories (the ‘winning hearts and minds’ mentality). While CA can potentially serve as a coordination tool at a ministerial level in donor countries, it should not be confused with a doctrine that can be directly implemented in operational theatres. Sustainable civil capacity building cannot be initiated in areas marked by active conflict.
- **Minimise the gap between the needs of the recipient and donor countries.** Our earlier point (the first learning complex regarding a knowledge disconnect) is also significant here. Both military and, perhaps especially, civil efforts were largely based on general assumptions about what should be prioritised, rather than local assessments in Afghanistan of what could make a difference. ANDSF training was not based on an analysis of the needs in Afghanistan. Instead, it was predominantly influenced by limitations on Western resources or whatever NATO and/or the US required assistance with regarding counterinsurgency.
- **Focus on peacebuilding in parallel or prior to capacity building.** Peacebuilding (initiatives related to ceasefires, reconciliation, etc.) is a central premise for both military and civil capacity building and should be regarded as a

prerequisite for these efforts. Afghanistan teaches us that the lack of focus on peace (and, consequently, the persistent emphasis on security creation) was one of the fundamental reasons for the capacity-building failure. An approach integrating peacebuilding with civil capacity building is less fraught with tension.

Peace in war

As this book has shown, there were multiple reconciliation and peace initiatives, but they lacked a focus on a shared effort to ensure broad representation. Pursuing a peace track was initially considered illegitimate, particularly due to President Bush's uncompromising rhetoric of being 'with or against' the Americans. Subsequently, the situation was complicated by a fundamental ambiguity regarding what type of political outcome in Afghanistan would actually be deemed sufficient. Given that doing so was difficult to articulate publicly, merely opening up for a role for the Taliban remained politically contentious – despite the fact that such a scenario had been anticipated since 2011. Paradoxically, ownership of the endgame ultimately rested with the Taliban.

In the early phases, negotiations were not viewed as a genuine alternative to war

Negotiations with the Taliban were incorporated into the process so late that they effectively became part of the exit strategy (the desire to *withdraw from Afghanistan*) rather than being integrated into considerations of peacebuilding *in Afghanistan*. The opportunity for genuine negotiations earlier in the process was primarily constrained by the intervening countries' domestically driven lack of acceptance of negotiations with the Taliban. On a deeper level, this reflects a lack of a realistic formulation of what success would mean; which societal outcomes were at stake, and what the concrete objectives of the War in Afghanistan were intended to be.

In hindsight, a relatively simple piece of advice could be summarised as: 'If the enemy calls and surrenders, pick up the phone!' This situation likely speaks volumes about what is politically feasible at any given time. Immediately following 9/11, a US president could not make compromises with anyone (the Taliban) whom the media could not differentiate from Al-Qaeda, but this lack of distinction was also part of the political rhetoric.

The Americans negotiated when the Taleban was at its strongest

As this book has mapped out, the Kabul government and the United States consistently followed different lines and priorities, which was difficult to settle given how the relationship between the two was problematic from the outset. At the same time, the Afghan government, which initially stemmed from an internationally orchestrated agreement, was sidelined in the peace negotiations. A compromise with the Taliban would necessarily have involved some form of complex power-sharing with mutual security guarantees and international anchorage. Such an arrangement

could not emerge from parallel negotiations but would have required a unified negotiation process that both committed the Kabul government and ensured international support through the UN for a long-term guarantee arrangement.

Learning, peace in war

- **An internationally monitored peace track should be initiated early.** In the wake of regime change operations and in a country like Afghanistan with a significant Cold War legacy, initiating and maintaining an internationally monitored peace track was crucial. In Afghanistan, the situation was characterised by secrecy and parallel processes, which ultimately favoured the Taliban. The international community collectively lacked focus on an Afghan negotiation track after the Bonn Agreement, feeling constrained as US allies, which pursued a unilateral approach and dominated the process. In such situations, like-minded countries should come together to create a counterbalance, ensuring that internal reconciliation and peacebuilding receive the necessary focus and are monitored by international organisations such as the UN (regional organisations or countries considered neutral in the conflict may also play this role).
- **Conflicts have moments that can trigger change (if recognised and acted upon).** Scholarly understanding of when a conflict is 'ripe' for negotiations is crucial; to maximise outcomes, negotiations should occur when the adversary is weak and has something to lose.¹⁵ Furthermore, there is research suggesting that there can be moments when insurgent groups may transform or weaken due to parts of the movement wanting to lay down their arms.¹⁶ For instance, there were instances (which were dismissed) when smaller Taliban factions sought to establish themselves as a political party and operate within the new system. Additionally, the Afghan government made (albeit unsuccessful) efforts to re-integrate and disarm the Taliban. Such moments and strategies did not receive sufficient attention from the coalition countries.
- **Focus on a representative and locally owned peace track.** Representativity was a significant issue in both the Bonn and Doha processes; while the Taliban were initially excluded from participation in the new system, the Afghan government was excluded from negotiations regarding the withdrawal towards the end of the war. The ambition to promote democracy fundamentally requires ensuring representativeness in political processes. As this book has shown, the alliance of intervening countries with selected brutal actors undermined the democracy project. Moreover, the concept of 'representative,' as used here, should be applied with local sensitivity – it must ultimately be understood in relation to the specific community and the functioning national political arrangement.
- **Value politics on pause.** To facilitate negotiations with a party that has a markedly different vision for society than one's own, it is necessary to openly discuss a local compromise based on principles different from the central concepts employed by the West. This also necessitates a challenging domestic effort within Western countries to explain the rationale behind 'imperfect' outcomes. Although it may become easier over time – as the necessity for

compromise is recognised – it also becomes more difficult due to the sacrifices made. Consequently, insights of this nature tend to repeatedly arrive a little too late and are therefore not tailored to the actual balance of power in relation to the counterpart, missing the optimal moment for a positive negotiation outcome. It is worth noting, however, that some countries (including Norway and Germany) focused on this aspect early on, but a formal peace track was never adequately supported or afforded the significance it deserved. The central political challenge is that the best timing in relation to the counterpart occurs when one is strongest, yet this is also when it is most challenging to achieve domestic acceptance of it; at that point, arguments for negotiation are likely to be unwelcome information among key decision-makers. This represents a crucial learning point to take from the experience in Afghanistan, allowing the weight of this operation to foster greater openness to such unpopular inputs in the future. In any similar future situation, it will be essential to enable a less ideologically pure discussion of acceptable outcomes.

Legitimacy

This book has demonstrated that the military intervention, the Bonn process and the manner in which capacity-building efforts were implemented created legitimacy challenges (e.g., the alliance with and support for brutal local actors, Guantanamo, Quran desecrations, WikiLeaks, tolerance for collateral damage, civilian Afghan casualties, corruption in the central government) that the Taliban could exploit. In Afghanistan, these factors both undermined state-building efforts and led to the mobilisation of the enemy. At the same time, the prolonged presence of international forces also posed problems: The processes we have described reveal how, throughout the 20-year engagement, new challenges continuously arose that the involved countries attempted to address. A key lesson is that an external actor typically has time against them – not only if they are a ‘direct’ occupying power, but also if they support a local government; over time, they risk being perceived as the root problem. Legitimacy does not easily accrue to a foreign actor nor to their local representative. International interventions should therefore typically be either much more ambitious (as may only be possible in situations such as the aftermath of World War II) or more limited in scope, to avoid becoming entrenched in a protracted operation with increasingly eroded legitimacy.

Civilian casualties hurt the legitimacy of the coalition

In Afghanistan, the specific nature of the enemy and the consequent difficulty in identifying targets further complicated the situation. As described in the chapter on the US, an awareness of the risk of inadvertently contributing to the insurgents’ popularity was central to the COIN strategy and how it was formulated. The fact that this nevertheless became such a significant part of the problem is indicative of how this was not merely a simple underestimation, but rather a fundamental challenge faced by any international intervention.

Moreover, there were specific issues related to the interaction and division of labour between the international actors and their local partners. Beginning in 2014–15, the Afghan forces were granted greater decision-making power, including in relation to air operations, which resulted in spiking casualty figures. Although Afghans were making many of the problematic decisions at that point, the international coalition bore the brunt of accountability for these actions – an outcome that otherwise aimed to address some of the other issues related to local ownership and competence. This exemplifies a serious trade-off. Additionally, the Taliban also killed many locals – and not solely as collateral damage. Nonetheless, the international coalition experienced a significant loss of legitimacy due to civilian casualties. Firstly, because they are foreign; there is a near-universal reaction among populations in such contexts to focus more on killings perpetrated by external actors.¹⁷ Secondly, the Taliban presented an underlying proposition that they could bring the war to an end if they were to gain power, as they had previously demonstrated. Public fatigue with the war can easily translate into a desire for foreign forces to withdraw, as locals remain regardless; hence, peace becomes synonymous with power shifting to the most unequivocally local actor.

The burden of aligning with brutal local partners

The United States was not naive about the dubious nature of the issues raised by the so-called ‘warlords’. However, the only alternative was a more substantial commitment of its own resources from the outset, which was politically unrealistic at the time. Technically, it would have been possible for President Bush to deploy additional American troops, including from Uzbekistan. Alternatively, he could have pushed for a more police-oriented action. Neither option was deemed politically realistic, but this was more a reflection of the American administration’s worldview than ‘objective’ circumstances. Forming alliances with questionable local actors can be a rational strategy – especially when the goal is to reduce one’s own costs – if the operation is short-term and does not involve the establishment of a political regime. Such a strategy may be suitable if the aim is simply to prevent a specific development or to protect particular interests. However, if one becomes long-term dependent on highly problematic local players, it is crucial to consider how this dependency undermines the legitimacy and coherence of the operation.

The corruption challenges and civil engagement strategies

Corruption is an inevitable issue due to the fundamental asymmetry between societies, specifically the global structural inequality between countries such as the US, Denmark and Afghanistan. A substantial international effort from some of the world’s wealthiest nations in one of the poorest countries will inevitably give rise to problematic dynamics within the local society surrounding those who have access to this foreign source of revenue. In Afghanistan, private security firms became part of the short-term solution and, consequently, a significant part of the long-term problem. They offered a seemingly painless delegation that prioritised ‘security

first', without direct involvement from state actors in the corruption, while their high pricing contributed significantly to the acceleration of corruption.

Continuous recognition of the problem and an increased focus on monitoring can yield some benefits, but the corruption issue should also be included in the broader assessment of an operation's feasibility. Absorptive capacity is typically a central consideration in development cooperation, and depending on the society in question, a community's ability to absorb external resources has specific limits. In Afghanistan, money was spent faster than it could be monitored,¹⁸ and this exacerbated the corruption challenges, as our analysis of civil capacity development has shown. Thus, this factor should not only be incorporated into the design of an operation but also into the assessment of its feasibility. If the operation involves an overwhelming international 'takeover' of a local community, there must be extra attention to developing mechanisms to combat corruption. This is particularly challenging in a society like Afghanistan, where there is considerable distance to local communities that do not easily conform to centralised standards.

At the same time, it is crucial not to make the reasons for the corruption 'too Afghan'. There is a prevalent narrative surrounding the war that attributes the outcome to Afghanistan being corrupt. However, the failure is ultimately not the fault of the Afghan people. It is a structural characteristic of such extremely asymmetric global relations, and it is our error for not factoring in this problem, which the intervening countries should have been able to foresee. The chain of knowledge did not break, neither regarding the principled stance on corruption or the assessment of what was happening in Afghanistan; rather, policy makers failed to recognise the *extent* of the detrimental impact of corruption and to integrate this understanding into strategic considerations.

The protracted war created legitimacy issues

Short, limited operations are by no means a guarantee of success; however, among the many American operations since World War II, the relatively few that have succeeded are those characterised by 'clear, achievable goals and informed by accurate assessments of local conditions'.¹⁹ In contrast, larger operations with extensive objectives have been prone to failure – although the notable exceptions are exactly the biggest and most famous: Germany and Japan after World War II. The many unique characteristics of these cases often impede the understanding of the various types of interventions. Total regime change operations are so demanding that they rarely occur without a much more extreme prelude – both for the recipient and the initiator. Attempts at taking de facto control of the political governance of another society without this type of comprehensive operation typically devolve into the very kind of national liberation struggle that has proven most difficult to suppress. In most situations, therefore, it is more realistic to focus on far more limited goals (e.g., eliminating a specific military threat or assisting one country in repelling the aggression of another) without the illusion that one could or should ensure a specific political development within that country afterwards. In Afghanistan, we ultimately experienced the worst of both worlds in the sense that it became a regime change operation without any genuine strengthening of the new regime.

Learning and legitimacy

- **Ownership in practice, not just declarations.** Any decision regarding intervention and international involvement must ensure local ownership, not merely in declarations of intent but down to the operationalisation of efforts. The lesson from Afghanistan is that despite intentions regarding ownership and sustainability, the implementation worked against these aims. The same applies to declarations regarding democracy, where Western support for undemocratic and corrupt forces ultimately undermined legitimacy.
- **Avoid long-term interventions.** Engaging in a prolonged intervention creates legitimacy challenges, partly because, over time, local parties may come to perceive one as the root of evil. Waging war against an opponent that some segments of the population perceive to be the national counterbalance to a foreign occupying power and its local representatives rarely yields positive outcomes. Consequently, it is crucial to have a realistic plan for a swift process that prevents such entrapment – which also necessitates a scaling back of the ambitions of the intervention. This represents one of the most significant lessons and connects back to previous points, as allowing the operation's goals to accumulate into an endless list will make it challenging to confine the operation. Furthermore, realistic feedback regarding the level of progress for both civilian and military capacity building must be sufficiently incorporated to determine when it is time to make necessary compromises and to find a way to finish – in less than 20 years and in a manner that does not result in power reverting to those with whom one initially went to war.

Notes

- 1 'The numerous purposes can be attributed to the involved countries balancing considerations of alliances, domestic electorates, national security interests and value-based rights agendas over the 20 years of changing governments'. See also Mona K. [Sheikh \(2022\)](#), '20 år i Afghanistan: Hvad ved vi om det, vi lærte?', *Internasjonal Politikk*, pp. 271–284.
- 2 The conclusion presented in this book is entirely in line with an American evaluation of the war, the key points of which were published in *Foreign Affairs* in 2024: 'Although accusations of American incompetence in Afghanistan now focus on those last days in August 2021, the real error had been made long before, at the moment of the United States' greatest victory there: The fall of the Taliban in December 2001. Flush with success, hungry for vengeance, and confident of the Taliban's complete defeat, the United States sought neither reconciliation nor compromise with Afghanistan's former leaders. Instead, it sought to make an example of them. In doing so, the George W. Bush administration planted the seeds for the Taliban insurgency that would emerge and eventually wipe away two decades of sacrifice in Afghanistan'. See Michael Cohen et al., 'America's missed chance in Afghanistan', *Foreign Affairs*, 15 August 2024.
- 3 In Danish: 'Det vil være et centralt mål med udredningen, at der identificeres relevante læringspunkter, som kan være af værdi for fremtidige beslutninger i relation til igangværende og fremtidige danske militære og civile bidrag til internationale indsatser. Herunder det helt grundlæggende spørgsmål om hvordan Taleban kunne genvinde magten i Afghanistan efter 20 års massiv civil og militær international indsats i landet [...] vurdere og evaluere Danmarks indsats med henblik på læring til brug for

overvejelser om fremtidige freds-, stabiliserings- og genopbygningsindsatser'. [Folketinget \(2021\)](#), *Aftale om uvildig historisk udredning af Danmarks militære og civile indsatser i Afghanistan i perioden 2001–2021*.

- 4 The Norwegian evaluation from 2016 points out very clearly that even Norway – with its distinct profile as a peace mediator and its own approach to international conflicts – must prepare for future engagements to also occur 'as part of an international effort in which others will set the main parameters' [*'som en del af en internasjonal innsats der andre vil sette de viktigste rammene'*]; Bjørn T. Godal et al., 'En god alliert: Norge i Afghanistan 2001–2014', 6 June 2016, Norges offentlige utredninger, p. 12. In principle, one can choose to decline participation, but the primary considerations should focus on how to engage in efforts where one does not have a leading role. How can the trade-offs in such a situation be managed? How can one create opportunities for influence with allies? And how can this be communicated to the public?
- 5 An important note is that knowledge decoupling can also be seen as a 'feature not a bug', which is an automatic effect in situations like this and therefore cannot be addressed solely by providing information. Decision-making systems produce non-knowledge. This issue can be challenging to discuss, as it easily sounds like a conspiracy theory or accusations about some individuals possessing complete knowledge and concealing it from others. However, it often involves the weight of significant decisions, such as war, neutralising the risk of cancellation or diversion through many small decisions that appear to individual participants as their duty to uphold the correct and necessary policy. Knowledge is thus often present in the system, but it is located where it poses no risk to the operation – such as among former deployed personnel – and is filtered out in the long chains of information and decisions. This somewhat abstract point is crucial for ensuring that learning is focused correctly. If it were natural and normal for information to flow freely and to be fairly weighed at every level, we would only need to address specific sources of error and barriers in the information streams. However, this book has demonstrated how unpopular insights are often discarded, meaning that better management of future challenges requires procedures that actively seek out and expose unwelcome insights. It is a well-known phenomenon (recognised at least since Hannah Arendt's study of the Pentagon Papers) that it is particularly difficult to implement experience-gathering when there is reason to believe that the experiences will be uncomfortable. See Hannah [Arendt \(1971\)](#), 'Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers', *The New York Review of Books*, November 18, 1971.
- 6 In the public debate, as described in the Introduction, there may be a tendency to over-emphasise Afghan exceptionalism (the *uniqueness* of Afghanistan) as an explanation for why the mission failed. We argue that the sentiment in the West following 9/11 left many Western audiences with the impression that there were no other options available besides the one led by the Americans. In some contexts, Afghan exceptionalism is highlighted in discussions about how 'we knew too little' about the specific context in which we intervened, suggesting that if there had been better political-analytical and cultural competencies, the outcome would have been different. While we have identified knowledge deficits as a problem, we also point out that there were other dominant logics, beyond knowledge of the situation in Afghanistan, that influenced the course of the war.
- 7 See also Michael Cohen et al., 'For want of a nail: The flawed assumptions that drove twenty years of US engagement in Afghanistan', Afghanistan Assumptions Project, June 2023, p. 3.
- 8 See, e.g., [The Soufan Center \(2021\)](#), 'Diminished, but not defeated'; Dino Krause and Mona K. Sheikh (2021), *The Taliban back in power: An assessment of al-Qaeda and IS two decades after 9/11*, DIIS; Erin [Miller \(2022\)](#), *A Look Back at 2020: Trends from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD)*, START.
- 9 Precisely because the stakes are so high, and the catastrophic outcome is therefore so significant (meriting an inquiry such as the one upon which this book is based), it is also

very difficult to change course. The ‘investment fallacy’ is a well-known dynamic and highlights how challenging it can be to alter direction after committing substantial resources to a mission that has also resulted in loss of life and injuries. From the very first classic book on psychology and foreign policy, it has been understood that a particular optimism accompanies action. While we all possess a fundamental ‘*confirmation bias*’ and tend to filter information to confirm our existing beliefs, an ‘acting’ actor will have an even stronger need to eliminate counterarguments to create certainty about the correctness of their own choice; crudely put, the closer the decision is to a 50:50 balance, the greater the pressure to convince oneself – particularly – to believe that the choice is unequivocally right and necessary, precisely because there was actual doubt. The acting actor cannot afford to have doubts. Robert Jervis (1976), *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton University Press, p. 383–402.

- 10 One might also consider the conclusion reached by the Norwegian inquiry: To be more insistent in primarily undertaking tasks that align with one’s own approach to the war and to avoid mixed approaches as much as possible. Godal et al., ‘En god alliert’, pp. 12, 202f.
- 11 This pattern has recently recurred in relation to Ukraine, where critical observers have called for the Ukrainians to receive what they need most, rather than what donor countries send for the sake of signalling.
- 12 The Danish *samtænkt* translates directly to ‘conceived together’, as in: ‘thought of together’.
- 13 The Norwegian evaluation from 2016 presents an interesting contrast. Norway was generally more sceptical about the comprehensive approach, being more classically committed to the idea that civil tasks should be kept separate, with a priority on long-term efforts. It therefore concludes that it was a mistake for Norway to engage more than strictly necessary in operations that deviated from its own strategy regarding the relationship between military and civil efforts.
- 14 The three reports produced by the lessons-learned process consist of Louise Riis Andersen (2016), *Afghanistan erfaringsopsamling 2001–2014 – Del I: Internationale erfaringer med samtænkning i Afghanistan*, DIIS; Nicole Ball et al. (2016), *Afghanistan erfaringsopsamling 2001–2014: Del II: Udviklingssamarbejde i Afghanistan*, DIIS; Steen Bornholdt Andersen et al. (2016), *Afghanistan erfaringsopsamling 2001–2014 – Del III Danske erfaringer med stabiliseringsprojekter og CIMIC*, DIIS.
- 15 For more on this debate, see Tetsuro Iji and Siniša Vuković (2024), *Revisiting the ‘Ripeness’ Debate*, Routledge.
- 16 See, e.g., Benjamin Acosta (2014), ‘From bombs to ballots: When militant organizations transition to political parties’, *Journal of Politics*, pp. 666–683.
- 17 Michael Mann (2023), *On Wars*, Yale University Press; John Tirman (2012), *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America’s Wars*, Oxford University Press; Stephen M. Walt (2005), *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy*, Norton.
- 18 SIGAR (2021), *What we need to learn: Lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction*, p. 32.
- 19 Jennifer Kavanagh and Bryan Frederick (2023), ‘Why force fails: The dismal track record of U.S. military interventions’, *Foreign Affairs*.

Appendix

On Learning

Learning is difficult, especially learning from one's mistakes. And even more so jointly as a society. The term 'learning' itself can give the impression that 'mistakes' – defined as decisions or behaviours that contributed to a negative outcome in relation to one's objectives – primarily stem from a lack of insight, which can be corrected once such insight is gained. The analysis of the War in Afghanistan has demonstrated that relevant knowledge was typically present within parts of the political system or among 'the executors' (those deployed to Afghanistan, both civilian and military) at the relevant time. However, competing interests and agendas prevented this knowledge from forming the basis of key decisions regarding the war and the policies enacted. The purpose of learning in a report of this nature is, therefore, to draw out insights that, based on the investigation, are assessed to have had a significant negative impact on the outcome and simultaneously represent potential points at which decisions or actions could have been made differently.

The distinction between drawing conclusions and learning lies in how the former summarises and weighs the key factors explaining the outcome, whereas learning pertains to particularly relevant points for decisions and planning in future operations. Learning thus points towards recommendations that can better equip the country and decision-makers to handle similar situations in the future. We do not offer recommendations as retrospective advice to decision-makers regarding what they could or should have done in the War in Afghanistan. However, considerations regarding learning sometimes necessarily address which alternatives were relevant at given moments, without us being able to state definitively what the outcome would have been; or whether the outcome necessarily would have been more positive had one of the alternatives been chosen. Based on the identification of these moments in which actions could have been different, it is possible to recommend that future decision-makers remain particularly vigilant in similar situations.

It is fortunate and productive that this report has been conducted at a time when Denmark is not on the brink of a new intervention. There is always a risk that the implementation of learning is influenced by the current agenda. The report is, of course, set within a specific political context marked by the Russo–Ukrainian War and heightened levels of international tension. However, it is still beneficial

for a relatively open and balanced collection of experiences that this is neither an investigation that directly seeks to assign responsibility nor one that enters debate regarding a specific, new intervention. The aim is to focus on the experiences from Afghanistan and to extract learning points that can be expected to be relevant for a broad range of potential international peace, stabilisation and reconstruction efforts.

This leads us to the first of the four clarifications (summarised briefly in the learning section in [Chapter 7](#)).

The first concerns the **transferability** of experiences from Afghanistan to future situations. A learning point from the Afghan experience can be significant in terms of explaining the outcome there but simultaneously be of limited value in a specific new international effort. For instance, a consistent conclusion in the chapter on the US war in Afghanistan is that the alliance with dubious warlords remained a burden, but this may not necessarily be a factor of the same significance if Denmark is faced with a potential decision to participate in an international effort in a country with a very different history, culture, political economy or social structure. In a purely academic inquiry, this question would typically revolve around establishing generalisability: Is this a factor that will always play a role, regardless of the context in which we may choose to intervene? Or is it, at the other end of the spectrum, Afghanistan-specific? From a practical political perspective, however, this is not the relevant question. The experiences should not be used to guide future Danish efforts in hundreds of different situations, but rather in a few specific contexts. Based on the events in Afghanistan, the pertinent knowledge for decision-makers is, therefore, that we have identified a learning point to be mindful of. As regards a specific future operation, however, the particular situation should always be assessed in terms of whether it has characteristics that render the point more or less relevant than it was with respect to this report's findings on the Afghanistan mission.

In addition to the fact that some experiences may be Afghanistan-specific – conditioned by the nature of Afghan society and the specific adversaries (the Taliban and al-Qaeda) – the entire process also possesses unique traits arising from 9/11 as an extreme event. The terrorist attack in the US obliged the American president at that time to act; there was little opportunity to conduct a cool assessment of the prospects for success in a military effort; it was almost unthinkable that the US would not respond militarily and massively. Likewise, there was particularly strong pressure on Denmark and other allies to demonstrate solidarity in this situation. The initial decision to embark on a war was made under atypical conditions, for which reason the intervention unfolded in a manner that can reasonably be characterised as a continuous exploration of possible adjustments to an operation that likely had no real prospect of success from the outset. If the operation was initially without any 'solution' in sight, individual elements should not be seen as now proven wrong or responsible for the negative outcome. Measures that did not work were, in many cases, rational attempts at trying something different when the previous plan failed. If viable solutions were not available, however, the new approach merely became another route to the negative outcome.

The second clarification is that learning points are relevant to three distinct dynamics: (1) **initiation**, (2) **formulation** and (3) **continuation/adjustment/termination of an international operation**. Firstly, it is possible to learn regarding future decisions on *whether* an international intervention should be undertaken – and whether Denmark should participate in it. This fundamentally relates to the operation's prospects for success: Succeeding within reasonable costs concerning human lives, financial expenditure and political capital. Given that the course of events in Afghanistan ended as they did, with the Taliban regaining power, it is a logical possibility that a lesson could be drawn in terms of it being a *mission impossible* to undertake a major and fundamental intervention under the given conditions. The lesson in relation to a similar situation would therefore be: '**Don't!**' The second – and in this report, the primary – type of learning pertains to *how* an operation should be designed. What mistakes were made across the various elements of the intervention? The mandate explicitly asks a third type of question: Given that there were ongoing reports and intelligence on developments in Afghanistan, *why* were more appropriate adjustments not made along the way? What can we learn regarding future efforts to avoid persisting on a doomed course when warnings are actually available? The background for this inquiry was precisely that the accelerated collapse of the West-supported regime to the Taliban came as a surprise in 2021, yet it actually followed repeated warnings that collectively indicated that this outcome was overwhelmingly probable; albeit perhaps surprising in its pace and specific form. Why was there not a more effective response to this, either in terms of adjusting the course or a much earlier withdrawal to avoid unnecessary loss of life and resources, and possibly even with an opportunity to negotiate a better political compromise? A distinct type of 'mistake' therefore concerns the ability to incorporate unpopular information throughout the process.

The third clarification addresses **what pertains specifically to Danish decisions and what should constitute learning in relation to the overall international effort in which Denmark is involved**. Many of the 'mistakes' identified in the Afghanistan process do not concern decisions that Denmark could have made differently, for they were not decisions made by Denmark but rather by either the international coalition or, typically, its leading nation. However, this is not an argument for excluding these questions from the study. On the one hand, Denmark fundamentally always has a degree of opportunity to influence – and, as a loyal, generous contributor, perhaps more than one might expect – while, on the other hand, it is inherent in the rationale for this inquiry that learning is desired that can be applied to future international operations. It is therefore important to develop an understanding of which efforts are realistic and sensible, regardless of whether the primary decisions regarding the design lie with other countries. Danish participation should fundamentally be based on an evaluation of the operation itself, and we therefore seek to learn about the optimal design of such operations.

If one were to adopt a very narrow Danish perspective on learning, one might argue that the benchmark should be whether we meet the actual political

objectives for Danish participation rather than the operation's principal aims. The previous Danish war assessment¹ indicates that Danish decision-makers were motivated in many situations more by positioning Denmark appropriately in relation to the US than by addressing challenges in the countries where we went to war. An evaluation based on such a narrowly *Danish* premise could, thus, conclude that all was well: The Danish effort fulfilled its purposes. But this would be a skewed interpretation of the political motivation behind this report, which, in accordance with the repeated references to the Taliban seizing power, is motivated by a desire to understand why the operation did not succeed concerning Afghanistan (not whether it succeeded in terms of Danish political prestige in Washington). The decisive metric for learning should therefore be how well the various decisions contributed to fulfilling the declared purposes of the international operation. Underlying motivations and considerations, including the alliance with the US, may be important for understanding why we went to war. When deriving learning points, however, the measurement criterion should be the declared objectives, both because they are democratically established (based on political statements regarding why the intervention took place) and because they (regardless of what the actual intentions may have been) become real objectives (important for the politicians themselves, as those goals must be achieved) as soon as they are declared.

The fourth and final clarification concerns **whether problems are isolable single factors/errors that can be corrected, or whether they are systematic, unavoidable issues inherent** in an international operation of the nature of the War in Afghanistan. Firstly, there are mistakes and oversights that could have been addressed differently; put simply, if we could redo the operation, we could and would do it in the manner we have now learned, and we have reason to believe it would have worked. The second type consists of systematic problems associated with operations of this nature, which arise even when one is aware of them and attempts to avoid them. If learning is translated into concrete countermeasures, however, it is theoretically possible to minimise such challenges. The internal dynamics of the political systems of intervening states, for example, exert pressure to focus on quick successes that can be ticked off as achieved rather than on long-term efforts. These systems will invariably also 'filter information optimistically' when reported upwards. The third and final type involves problems that are unavoidable because they stem from larger, long-term international missions of this nature. For example, prolonged foreign interventions inevitably generate opposing forms of identification (nationalism or similar resistance to the foreign power) and subsequent counter-mobilisation. Similarly, a certain degree of corruption is unavoidable, as it is not solely driven by local conditions but also by the asymmetry resulting from international actors intervening in a poorer country.

This distinction between more or less correctable issues may initially appear unnecessarily negative – why not incorporate all of the lessons learned and implement them to the fullest extent? Why diminish some of them by categorising them as structural traits that are therefore more difficult or impossible to correct? It is, in fact, essential to include such critical reflection, as *lessons-learned* exercises

otherwise risk creating a false sense of security; that after this learning, we are now equipped for success in a similar situation. The report then risks contributing to the very opposite of its intended purpose: Misinterpreting the experience with inflated expectations that future international efforts will be more successful because we have now learned the ‘technical details’ from the War in Afghanistan. It is important to be aware of this implicit risk associated with learning operations: By identifying a specific error, one inadvertently gives the impression that if only *that* had been done differently, the international effort would likely have succeeded.² To avoid such ‘mislearning’, it is crucial to note, first, that the report has identified a very long list of problems, indicating that there were plentiful reasons for the negative outcome. Corrections to individual points would most likely have been insufficient to change the outcome in this case, even though learning from all aspects remains relevant. The overall picture presented by this inquiry report indicates that the mission faced significant challenges from start to finish, albeit with notable highs and lows. Secondly, it is important to distinguish between issues that could relatively easily have been addressed differently and would have been approached better had we possessed today’s hindsight versus elements that systematically go awry due to identifiable mechanisms (in the political, administrative or military systems of the sending countries, in the international collaboration, or in interactions with the ‘recipient country’).

Finally, a note on corrective measures: An initiative may have had a positive effect without ultimately ensuring success for the West’s war in Afghanistan. There is a risk of primarily focusing on negative learning points – things that went wrong – given that the overall outcome was negative. However, there were certainly aspects that were done well in isolation and, in some cases, improved in ways that are worth noting. It is indeed possible to learn from a war that was doomed, as specific efforts may function more optimally in a different situation. One must also be aware of connections between different problems, such that decision-makers one has deliberately run one risk to handle one concern, weakening the handling of the other risk; in these cases, it is more about *trade-offs* than mistakes.

Ultimately, learning is not the same as the final judgement of history. The evaluation of the Afghanistan mission today unequivocally stands in the shadows of the chaotic exit and the tragic return of a Taliban regime that has reintroduced new forms of oppression, particularly against women. However, a 20-year presence has complex effects (e.g., in terms of hopes and ideas among young Afghans in particular), and the lessons learned may look different 20 years from now. This report assesses the background of the current situation, particularly the focus that the stakeholders have outlined in relation to the Taliban’s recapture of power – and what can be learned from this for future Danish missions.

Notes

- 1 Rasmus M. Mariager and Anders Wivel (2019), *Hvorfor gik Danmark i krig? Uvil- dig udredning af baggrunden for Danmarks militære engagement i Kosovo, Afghanistan og Irak* [Why did Denmark go to war? An independent analysis of the background to Denmark’s military engagement in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq]. Copenhagen: Copenhagen University

- 2 In previous evaluations, the problem of excessively narrow scope (and the consequent illusory potential for solutions) was embedded in the mandate from the political authorities. The 'lessons learned' exercises from 2009 and 2016 were directed towards a focus on the Comprehensive Approach, civil–military relations, and stabilisation, which effectively predetermined that this was the problem to be solved, while leaving no room for the involved researchers to examine the military components or the overarching political rationale behind the international effort. In contrast, other countries (e.g., Norway) conducted broader evaluations of their military engagements during the same period. The earlier Danish evaluations were narrowly defined, thereby questioning the war itself was off-limits; rather, improvements were to be made in relation to the Comprehensive Approach. Given that the present investigation has been tasked with addressing the question of learning more broadly, it is incumbent upon the evaluators to avoid producing a similar misunderstanding by implying that minor corrections would necessarily have altered the overall outcome. Many elements of learning will be *necessary* but not *sufficient* conditions for success.

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Index

Note: *Italicized* and **bold** page numbers refer to figures and tables, respectively. Page numbers followed by “n” refer to notes.

- AAF *see* [Afghan Air Force \(AAF\)](#)
AAN *see* [Afghanistan Analysts Network \(AAN\)](#)
Abdullah, A. [44](#), [74n21](#)
accidental guerilla [94](#)
accountability [3](#)
ACLED *see* [Armed Conflict Location and Events Data \(ACLED\)](#)
al-Adnani, A. M. [41](#)
Afghan Air Force (AAF) [121](#), [124–126](#)
Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) [25](#), [56](#), [57](#), [59](#), [65](#)
Afghanistan Assumptions Project, The [84](#)
Afghanistan Compact of 2006 [114](#), [143](#)
Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) [164n28](#)
Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) [1](#), [10](#), [13–15](#), [23–26](#), [33](#), [45](#), [59](#), [71](#), [176](#); civilian capacity building [145](#), [148](#), [150](#); leadership [63](#); military capacity building of [6](#), [113–133](#); offensive capabilities [61](#)
Afghan National Police (ANP) [13–14](#), [132](#), [140n155](#)
Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Programme (APRP) [63](#)
Afghan Special Operations Forces [124](#), [125](#)
AfPak [96](#)
Ahmadinejad, M. [67](#)
Akhund, M. M. R. [26](#), [40](#)
Akhundzada, H. [52n150](#)
Algeria [85](#)
Ali, H. [43](#)
al-Qaeda [1](#), [13](#), [22](#), [39](#), [56](#), [58](#), [62](#), [67](#), [73n1](#), [105](#), [116](#), [132](#); 9/11 attacks [21](#); attack on Kenya and Tanzania US embassies [21](#); attack on USS *Cole* [21](#), [79](#); fight against [177–178](#); US actions against [82](#), [83–89](#), [92](#), [94](#), [104](#)
ANDSF *see* [Afghan National Defense and Security Forces \(ANDSF\)](#)
ANP, *see* [Afghan National Police \(ANP\)](#)
APRP *see* [Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Programme \(APRP\)](#)
armed attacks [23–27](#)
armed conflict [1](#), [22](#), [23](#), [116](#)
Armed Conflict Location and Events Data (ACLED) [23](#)
ARTF *see* [Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund \(ARTF\)](#)
Australia: 3D concept (Defence, Diplomacy and Development) [158](#)
Bacon, T. [47n21](#)
Baradar, M. [19](#)
Baradar, M. A. G. [62](#), [68](#)
Bedraget i Helmand [The Deception in Helmand] [42](#)
Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) [71](#)
Berlin Agreement of 2004 [143](#)
Berlin Conference (2004) [143](#)
Biden, J. [59](#), [72](#), [96](#), [98](#); withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan [1](#), [27](#)
bin Laden, O. [1](#), [2](#), [21–22](#), [40](#), [60](#), [83](#), [85–88](#), [99](#), [102](#), [110n74](#), [114](#)
Blair, T. [157](#)
Bonn Agreement of 2001 [57](#), [58](#), [66](#), [114](#), [142–144](#), [146](#), [147](#), [150](#), [186](#); Annex 1 [115](#); Bonn II [63–64](#), [72](#)

- Bonn Conference 70, 91
 Bosnia 85
 BRI *see* [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#)
 Brisard, J.-C.: *Forbidden Truth* 21
 British Task Force 147
 Brown University 2
 Brzezinski, Z. 107n16
 Bush, G. W. 21, 58, 67, 79; 2002 State of the Union address 70; Bush Doctrine 99, 103; and counterinsurgency 93; presidency 82, 84, 88, 90, 93, 96, 99–102; War on Terror 56, 88, 146
 Byman, D. 47n21

 Cambone, S. 86
 CA *see* [Comprehensive Approach \(CA\)](#)
 Canada 157, 158
 Card, A. H., Jr. 82
 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) 40, 79, 82, 84–89, 92, 98, 99, 101; Counterterrorism Center (CTC) 88, 102, 103, 105, 112n95; funding 43; Jawbreaker 101
 Cheney, D. 82, 86
 Cheney, R. 70
 China 67, 69, 72, 82; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) 71; as mediator 70–71
 CIA *see* [Central Intelligence Agency \(CIA\)](#)
 CIMIC *see* [Civil–Military Cooperation \(CIMIC\)](#)
 civilian capacity building 6, 15–16, 141–163; challenges to 150; comprehensive approach to security and development 149–150; counterinsurgency 147–148; development, security situation restricting 150–152; domestic objectives of 156–159; external dependency of 159–161; institution building 148–149; legitimacy of Afghan central government 145–147; military efforts to 152–156; money spending 154–155
 civil–military (im)balance 182–185
 Civil–Military Cooperation (CIMIC) 144, 149, 150, 152, 153, 155
 ‘clear–hold–build’ mentality 152
 Clinton, B. 47n22, 83, 88, 89, 101
 COIN *see* [counterinsurgency \(COIN\)](#)
 Coll, S. 88
 Collins, J. J.: *Lessons Encountered* 87
 combat capability 23–27; first phase (2001–04) 24, 28; fourth phase (2014–17) 26–27, 28; second phase (2005–09) 24–25, 28; third phase (2010–13) 25–26, 28
 Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A) 117–119, 131
 Comprehensive Approach (CA) 141, 149–150, 152–154, 159, 162, 166n64, 183–184, 198n2
 comprehensive approach to security and development 149–150
 ‘conditions-based’ approach to international withdrawal 63–64
 conflict bundles: definition of 17n16
Costs of War project 104
 counterinsurgency (COIN) 58, 80, 93–97, 147–148, 152, 154, 187
 counterterrorism (CT) 58, 61, 72, 80, 88, 93–95, 97
 CSTC-A *see* [Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan \(CSTC-A\)](#)
 CT *see* [counterterrorism \(CT\)](#)

 Danish Defence Intelligence Service (DDIS) 37, 44–45, 52n149, 54n171
 Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) 56, 142
 Danish perspective on learning 193–197
 Danish Security and Intelligence Service 39, 177
 Darul Uloom Haqqania, Peshawar 19
 Dasquie, G.: *Forbidden Truth* 21
 Daud, S. M. 39
 Daudzai, H. 43, 74n23
 DDIS *see* [Danish Defence Intelligence Service \(DDIS\)](#)
 Denmark: military expenditures 3
 Deobandi movement 19, 22, 47n10
 DIIS *see* [Danish Institute for International Studies \(DIIS\)](#)
 disconnected knowledge 176–179
 Doha Agreement of 2020 11, 27, 46, 55, 59, 61–64, 72, 73n1, 173, 186
 Dostum, A. R. 19, 44
 Durand Line 20, 76–77n86
 DynCorp 129

 East Turkestan Islamic Movement 67
 Egypt 87
 Embedded Training Teams 119
 European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan – EUPOL 118, 119, 130

- Farrell, T. 38
 FDD *see* [Foundation for Defense of Democracies \(FDD\)](#)
 fear of terror 82–83
 Federally Administered Tribal Areas 85
 Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) 28
 fragmentation 179–182
 France 82
 Franks, T. 84–85
- GDP *see* [Gross Domestic Product \(GDP\)](#)
 G8 116
 GED *see* [Georeferenced Events Dataset \(GED\)](#)
 Georeferenced Events Dataset (GED) 23
 Germany: *loya jirga* (great assembly) 89; senior police leadership, training programmes for 117; uncoordinated initiatives with US 129
 Ghani, A. 1, 10, 43, 61, 63, 65, 69, 72, 121, 124, 137n71; electoral fraud 44, 74n21; as Karzai's adviser 147; as Minister of Finance 147
 Ghaus, M. 19
 Giustozzi, A. 37–38
 Goodson, L. 111n81
 Grenier, R. L. 88, 102, 103; 88 *Days to Kandahar: A CIA Diary* 81, 86
 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) 154
 Guantanamo Bay detention camp 91
- Haass, R. 84
 Hadley, S. J.: *Hand-Off: The Foreign Policy George W. Bush Passed to Barack Obama* 81
 Hanafi 19–20
 Haqqani, J. 39, 62; disagreements with Taliban 39
 Haqqani, S. 40, 52n150
 Haqqani Network 5, 39–41, 68
 Hazara minority 20
 Hekmatyar, G. 68, 76n86
 Helmand Provincial Education Ministry 37
 Hezb-e Islami Gullbuddin 68
 High Council for Islamic Jurisprudence 66
 High Council of Afghanistan Islamic Emirate 26, 40
 High Peace Council (HPC) 63, 65
 Hizb-e Islami/Hezb-e Islami 52n143, 64, 65
 Holbrooke, R. 105
 Hotak, M. K. 44
- HPC *see* [High Peace Council \(HPC\)](#)
 Human Rights Watch 43, 53n156
- ICG *see* [International Crisis Group \(ICG\)](#)
 IEDs *see* [improvised explosive devices \(IEDs\)](#)
 Ikenberry, K. 95
 improvised explosive devices (IEDs) 25, 38
 India 67, 69
 institution building 148–149
 International Crisis Group (ICG) 25, 35, 113
 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) 3, 10, 13, 23–26, 29, 38, 45, 64, 77n98, 91, 93, 95, 113, 115, 118–119, 123, 124, 126, 128–132; civilian capacity building 143–158, 160–163; Commander and Commander of US Forces in Afghanistan 118; Joint Command 118
 Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) 82, 100
 Iran 67, 72, 82, 86; as mediator 69–70; relationship with US 70
 Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) 39
 Iraq 71, 86; US invasion of 117; US war in 83–86, 107n11, 174
 IRGC *see* [Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#)
 IS *see* [Islamic State \(IS\)](#)
 ISAF *see* [International Security Assistance Force \(ISAF\)](#)
 ISI *see* [Inter-Services Intelligence \(ISI\)](#)
 ISKP *see* [Islamic State Khorasan Province \(ISKP\)](#)
 Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) 41, 67
 Islamic State (IS) 1, 61, 67
 Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) 2, 26, 37, 41, 46, 173
 Istanbul Conference of 2011 75n62
- Jackson, A. 33
jirgas (tribal councils) 42
- Kabul Conference (2005) 143, 144
 Karzai, A. W. 43
 Karzai, H. 10, 42–44, 57, 58, 61, 63, 67–70, 73, 144; electoral fraud 96–97; and US war in Afghanistan 89–91, 93, 100, 102, 104
 Kazakhstan 67
 Khalilzad, Z. 58, 59, 65, 66, 68

- Khan, F. 89
 Khan, I. 43
 Khan, M. Q. F. 89
 Khatami, M. 69
 Kilcullen, D. 26, 95; *Accidental Guerilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One, The* 94, 111n82
 Kyrgyzstan 67
- Lebanon 87
 ‘Lebanonisation’ of the Kabul government 104
 legitimacy 187–190; of Afghan central government 145–147; issues in US war in Afghanistan 91–93, 101–102; issues of central government, Taliban’s exploitation of 41–45
 liberal peacebuilding 116, 134n16, 143
 London Conference (2006) 143
Long War Journal (LWJ) 28, 30, 33
LWJ see *Long War Journal (LWJ)*
- Mahmoud, B. 86
 Malkasian, C. 103
 Manan, A. 52n150
 Manning, C. E. 109n52
 Mansour, M. A. 35–36, 40, 65
 Masood, A. 19
 Massoud, A. S. 89
 McChrystal, S. 29, 95, 96
 McKinney, C. A. 90
 military capacity building 13–18, 113–140;
 challenges to 122–131; coherence 114–116; counterinsurgency and transition (2006–11) 118–119; counterterrorism (2001–06) 117–118; exit from Afghanistan (2011–21) 120–121; fragmented responsibility 128–131; inadequate coordination 128–131; ownership 114–116, 135n20; short-term objectives of 122–125; support to NATO and US 125–128; sustainability 114–116
 Ministry of Defence 14, 123, 125, 133
 Ministry of Interior 14, 24, 133
 Miran Shah Shura 40
 Mujahid, Z. 61
 mujahideen movements 19, 22, 46n3, 65
 Murree Peace Process 65, 76n68
 Musharraf, P. 82
 Muslim Brotherhood 19
 Mutawakil, W. A. 58
 Myers, R. B. 82
- Najibullah, M. 19, 20
 NATO 9, 43, 60, 61, 67, 69, 71, 72, 79; capacity-building efforts 45; Comprehensive Approach (CA) 141; International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) 3, 10, 13, 23–26, 29, 38, 45, 64, 77n98, 91, 93, 95, 113, 115, 118–119, 123, 124, 126, 128–132, 143–158, 160–163; military capacity building support to 125–128; NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan (NTM-A) 118, 119, 130, 131; Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLT) 119, 131; Resolute Support Mission (RSM) 3, 14, 30, 41, 64, 113, 115, 120–121, 124, 128, 131, 132, 173
 Netherlands, the 158
 9/11 Commission 108n26
 Noor, A. M. 43
 Northern Alliance (United Islamic National Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan) 20–21, 42, 47n20, 57, 68, 70, 77n89, 78n102, 89, 98, 101–103
 North Korea 70, 86
 Norway 158; military expenditures 3
- Obama, B. 59, 91, 95, 132; presidency 96–97; and Taliban’s transition to RSM 58; withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan 13, 56, 69–71, 148
 OEF see *Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)*
 Omar, M. 19, 24, 40, 68, 75n39, 92, 99, 102, 103, 110n78; as Amir al-Mu’mineen (Leader of the Faithful) 20; opposition against bin Laden’s plans to attack US 22; ten-member leadership council (*shura*) 34
 OMLT see *Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLT)*
 Operational Mentoring and Liaison Teams (OMLT) 119, 131
 Operation Anaconda 92, 178
 Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) 3, 70, 114, 117–118, 129, 144
 Operation Moshtarak 152
 Osmani, M. A. M. 99
- Pakistan 21, 69, 76–77n86, 82, 85, 93, 171; actions in Afghanistan 77n89; ISI (intelligence service) 92; losses in 2; as mediator 67–68; Murree Peace Process 65
 Pashtun insurgent militias 102–103

- peace in war 185–187
 Peace Process Roadmap 64
 Peshawar Shura 40
 Petraeus, D. H. 93, 95
 Philippines, the 85
 polio vaccination campaign 35
 Powell, C. L. 82, 84, 89
 power sharing, rejection of 65–66
 Programme Tahkim-e Solh (PTS) 63, 75n59
 Prophet Muhammad 20
 Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) 94, 95, 130, 144, 145, 147, 151–154, 157–163
 PRTs *see* Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)
 PTS *see* Programme Tahkim-e Solh (PTS)
 Putin, V. 67, 78n99

 Qadeer, A. 43
 Qadeer, Z. 44
 QIPs *see* Quick Impact Projects (QIPs)
 Quetta Shura (aka Rahbari) 38, 40, 52n148, 68
 Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) 15, 148–150, 153, 162
 Quran 20

 Rabbani, B. 19, 63
 RAND 113, 126
 Rashid, A.: *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* 111n81
 Rasmussen, N. 181
 Raziq, A. 43
 Resolute Support Mission (RSM) 3, 14, 30, 41, 64, 113, 115, 120–121, 124, 128, 131, 132, 173
 Rice, C. 81, 82, 84, 86, 90, 93
 Roggio, B. 28, 30
 RSM *see* Resolute Support Mission (RSM)
 Rumsfeld, D. 81, 84–86, 101
 Russia 67, 82, 83; as mediator 68–69
 Ruttig, T. 74n18

 Saddam Hussein 70, 84, 157
 Sare Qeta Special Forces 38
 Saudi Arabia 21, 64, 87
 SCO *see* Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)
 security sector reform (SSR) 14, 122–125, 127, 129, 132, 133, 134n14, 134n16, 134n17, 157, 182; critiques of 116; development of 115–116; responsibilities, division of 117

 Semple, M. 38
 September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks 21–22, 79, 80, 82–83, 85, 87, 99, 105, 177
 shadow governments 33–37
 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) 69–71, 77n96
 Sherzai, G. A. 43
 shuras (religious councils) 42
 SIGAR *see* Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)
 Sirat, A. S. 89
 Somalia 87
 Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) 28–30, 59, 63, 75n59, 81, 127, 130, 142, 155, 183; *Why the Afghan government collapsed* 56, 113
 SSR *see* security sector reform (SSR)
 Stanekzai, S. M. A. 62, 75n60
 Stenersen, A. 110–111n78
 Strasbourg-Kehl Summit (2009) 119
 Sunni Muslims 19
 sustainability 114–116
 Sweden 158; military expenditures 3
 Syria 69, 71

 Tajikistan 67, 69, 82, 102
 Taliban: capture of Kabul 1; deaths caused by 40; development of 22–37, 28; direct dialogue with US 60–61; history of 18–22; ideological roots of 18–22; insurgency 93; movement, strength and strategy of 5, 10–11, 18–46; negotiations with 5, 11–12, 55–78; power, regaining 170–174; religious leadership 19; self-declaration as victors 62–63; sidetracking of government 61–62; ‘Statement from the Leadership Council of the Islamic Emirate’ 52n150; takeover 6, 7; underestimation of 177; *see also individual entries*
 Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) 53n156, 67, 68
 Tenet, G. J. 82, 85, 88, 99
 territorial control 27–33, 31, 32
 Tokyo Conference (2002) 90, 143, 146
 Track II negotiations 63, 68, 73n6
 ‘train, equip and deploy’ approach 123
 ‘train-the-trainer’ principle 129
 Trump, D. 59, 72, 148; 2019 State of the Union address 69; and Doha Agreement of 2020 27; on Islamic State 61; presidency 26, 97–98

- TTP *see* Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP)
- Turkey 64, 68
- Turkmenistan 67
- UCDP *see* Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)
- UK 64, 158
- Ukraine 69
- ul-Haq, A. 44
- UNAMA *see* United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)
- UN Charter: Article 51 114
- UNICEF: polio vaccination campaign 35
- United Arab Emirates 21
- United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) 143, 146, 160
- United States (US): Air Force 136n57; American National Guard 129; Army 125, 126, 129; Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A) 117–119, 131; Congress 93; Constitution 91; Department of Defense 91, 104, 118, 121, 129, 160; Department of State 129; direct dialogue with Taliban 60–61; Embedded Training Teams 119; invasion of Iraq 117; National Security Council (NSC) 81; Operation Anaconda 92, 178; Operation Enduring Freedom 3, 70, 114, 117–118, 129, 144; Pentagon 1, 21, 70, 79, 82, 84, 87, 89, 92–94, 102, 103, 114; relationship with Iran 70; Task Force Anvil 128; uncoordinated initiatives with Germany 129; war in Afghanistan *see* US war in Afghanistan; war in Iraq 83–86; War on Terror 56, 66, 67, 69, 72, 80, 82, 84, 85, 88, 91, 92, 100, 108n36, 146
- United States Institute of Peace (USIP) 66, 130, 140n56, 142
- UN Security Council 21, 26–27, 84; Resolution 1368 114, 142; Resolution 1378 114, 142; Resolution 1386 115; Resolution 1776 115
- Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) 23–24, 26, 46n1, 49n59; Georeferenced Events Dataset (GED) 23
- US *see* United States (US)
- ushr* 36
- USIP *see* United States Institute of Peace (USIP)
- USS *Cole*, al-Qaeda attack on 21, 79
- US war in Afghanistan 5–6, 12–13, 79–112; counterinsurgency 93–95; counterterrorism 93–95; dysfunctional state 103–104; enlarged enemy 99–101; knowledge base 83–88; lack of accountability 103–104; legitimacy 91–93, 101–102; Northern Alliance 102–103; Pashtun insurgent militias 102–103; stabilisation 91–93; strategies, shifting 95–98
- Uzbekistan 67, 69, 77n96, 82, 93, 102, 188
- Viet Cong 101
- Vietnam War 101
- warlordism 73n15, 188
- War on Terror 56, 66, 67, 69, 72, 80, 82, 84, 85, 88, 91, 92, 100, 108n36, 146
- weapons of mass destruction (WMD) 83–86, 100
- Weber, M. 109n44
- Weiner, T. 108n21
- Whitlock, C.: *Afghanistan Papers, The* 81, 86, 89
- WHO *see* World Health Organization (WHO)
- WikiLeaks 91, 109n52
- WMD *see* weapons of mass destruction (WMD)
- Wolfowitz, P. 84
- Woodward, B.: *Bush at War* 81
- World Bank 145, 147, 154, 156; Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) 164n28
- World Health Organization (WHO): polio vaccination campaign 35
- Yaqoob, M. 52n150
- Yemen 85
- Zaeef, A. S. 110n74
- zakat* 36
- Zakir, A. Q. 53n150
- Zaman, H. 43
- al-Zawahiri, A. 85