

The Recent US Intervention in Afghanistan

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Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on the strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. The statesman who yields to war fever must realize that once the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy, but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events.

Winston Churchill¹



Source: *The Globe and Mail*, August 23, 2017

¹ Sir Winston Churchill, *My Early Life: A Roving Commission* (London: Thorton Butterworth, Ltd., 1930), p. 246.

On August 14, 2017, President Donald Trump approved that US troops will remain in Afghanistan in a bid to assist the Afghan government against the surging Taliban. He noted that “the American people are weary of war without victory” on the basis that the US has been engaged in war in this country for over 16 years. “Americans have been engaged in this war longer than the First and Second world wars combined.”² His speech concluded after a months-long debate within the administration whether to pull back from the Afghanistan conflict or not. The Pentagon argued that the US must stay engaged to ensure terrorists can’t again use the territory to threaten America.³ On October 7, 2000, President G.W. Bush launched military operations against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Many elected officials were less enthusiastic about sending more troops to the war, as more than 2300 US soldiers have been killed and 17,000 wounded in the country since 2001.

There are several unique similarities between the US military intervention in Vietnam and Afghanistan. These can be described as follows:

1. The US became the third foreign power to invade Vietnam after the Japanese and French on the ground they intended to eradicate the spread of communism in SE Asia. The US launched attacks in Afghanistan after 9/11 to avenge the terrorist plot on the pretext the Taliban were harbouring Osama Bin Laden. This followed the invasion of Soviet forces in the country in the 1980s.
2. The US government supported a cadre of various South Vietnamese generals who had very little support from the local population and were seen as puppets to the Washington administration. Similar to the French occupation, many Vietnamese considered the US forces as foreign interlopers. In Afghanistan, the US for over 16 years have supported the central government in Kabul. Many local and regional leaders consider this government as corrupt and support the Taliban as more legitimate than the government in Kabul.
3. In Vietnam, US forces destroyed many villages and many in the rural population throughout the country were killed in airstrikes as “collateral damage” in the

² “Trump Shifts Course, Strengthening Commitment to Afghan War,” *Globe and Mail*, 15 August 2017, p. 1.

³ “America’s Afghanistan Strategy,” *National Post*, 15 August 2017, p. 1.

various offensive actions. In Afghanistan, the recent war plan approved by Defense Secretary Mathis appears to strengthen the rules of engagement from counterinsurgency to counterterrorism involving more drone strikes, and the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and CIA ops against alleged Taliban leaders. It is likely that American aircraft in such operations have also incurred casualties with the local population, which will turn more of the local population towards regional leaders and the Taliban; instead of the US forces.

4. In Vietnam, the US deployed at one time during the war over 600,000 troops, but in concert with the ARVN were still unable to defeat the Viet Cong in the guerilla warfare throughout Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, before they departed in 1973. The ARVN were then left on their own to defeat the strong invading troops from the north, until they were eventually overrun and Saigon capitulated. In Afghanistan, the US is still committed to the country's longest running war even though Washington initiated a troop drawdown in 2014. Now the Defense Secretary intends to commit a number of new troops to the battlefield, although the numbers are still unknown. Will such increased numbers of US forces allow the Afghan Army eventually to operate effectively alone without support from the US in its campaign against the Taliban? If not, the Afghan Army and police could end up with the same outcome as the ARVN in Vietnam; leaving Kabul to the Taliban and their supporters.
5. In Vietnam, Congress and the US population eventually lost faith in the reasons why the country was still engaged in the war in that country. In Afghanistan, after 16 years of deploying thousands of troops in that country, it could also be understood that the US public has largely dismissed the country's involvement in those military operations as well. Similar to the recognition by other foreign invaders that such ongoing military ops are extremely costly, it will be interesting to watch when Washington finally determines that such a positive military outcome is futile; as it did in Vietnam some forty years ago. Between 1965 and the last departure of an American soldier in 1973, the bill for Vietnam had totaled more than \$120 billion and the US forces suffered over 58,000 casualties. In Afghanistan, to date, after 16 years of warfare, as of October 18, 2016, the US has suffered 2,386 casualties with over 20,000 troops wounded.

Various academics have determined that the prolonged war in Afghanistan has cost the US over \$1 trillion.

It is interesting to note President Bush's plans in 2003 for invading Iraq, as noted in the book *Hubris* by Michael Isikoff and David Corn. The authors stated:

The world has a clear interest in the spread of democratic values, and that a new regime in Iraq would serve as a dramatic and inspiring example of freedom for other nations in the region. After having spent months building a case for war primarily on the threat of weapons of mass destruction, Bush was fully embracing the idealistic new-Wilsonian rhetoric that Paul Wolfowitz and other neoconservative intellectuals had used to bolster their years old case for war against Saddam would be a catalyst for change in the Middle East – and Bush was accepting that far-reaching mission as his own. A liberal pro-Western democracy in Iraq, he said, would usher in a new era of political reform and “begin a new stage” for Middle East peace.⁴

The US plan for initiating war in Iraq in many ways is similar to the position taken by the administration in invading Afghanistan. Instead of replacing Saddam, the intent is still to replace the Taliban with a centralized-backed government in Kabul based on “western” democratic principles instead of laws and customs formulated over centuries throughout the various regions of Afghanistan. Such plans, similar to those initially in Iraq, are aimed at bringing stability and unity throughout Afghanistan.

What is the potential impact of this recent strategic move by President Trump in Afghanistan? It briefly can be summarized as follows:

1. The President was not specific how many additional troops will be deployed, although many pundits maintain it will be in the neighbourhood of 4-5 thousand additional troops, in joining approximately 8,500 troops already stationed in the country. At one time, 100,000 US troops were stationed in Afghanistan. Critics would argue now if the US could not win then, how will the current number of troops from the US achieve any positive results in the country.

⁴ Michael Isikoff and David Corn, *Hubris* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), p. 191.

2. In the President's address, he stated: "we are not nation-building again but we are killing terrorists."⁵ This rationale seems to reflect a move away from counterinsurgency to a plan for counterterrorism with fewer restrictions on troops and less oversight on the military, JSOC, and the CIA. Such a strategy is counter to the positions advocated by Generals McChrystal and Petraeus who argued that counterinsurgency leads to less civilian casualties and a backlash against the US from the local population. There is also a likely increase of expanded secret operations in Afghanistan to kill suspected terrorists with limited restrictions and oversight from Congress on such missions.
3. The President also announced as part of his strategy: "we will ask our NATO allies and global partners to support our new strategy with additional troop and funding increases in line with our own. We are confident that they will," he said.⁶ It is likely that most political leaders in Europe will not support the US in asking for more troops in Afghanistan, and it is unlikely that Canada will also not support the new mission as outlined by President Trump.
4. President Trump also noted in his new strategy that he wants to expand the US regional interest with Pakistan and India; more than President Obama did. The US currently spends billions each year in assisting Pakistan with a significant military armament supply. As noted by some academics, previous administrations had no choice but to rely on Pakistan, as geography dictated that supplies for US and NATO forces mostly go through it.⁷ Confronting Pakistan to tighten up its' borders with the crossing of terrorists into Afghanistan is not a new request, although the ask is difficult because of the difficult terrain and topography separating the two countries. China is a strong supporter of Pakistan. It seems difficult to imagine if the US plans to play hardball with Pakistan leadership and at the same time obtaining support from the Pakistan military whose primary concern is India. Will ISI comply with the demands raised by President Trump?

⁵ "Trump Shifts Course," p. 1

⁶ John Ivison, "Afghanistan's Shifting Sands," *National Post*, 23 August 2017, NP 1

⁷ S. Saideman, "In Afghanistan, Can Trump Win Where Obama Couldn't," *Globe and Mail*, 23 August 2017, p. A-11.

The current strategy in addition to attacking the Taliban “terrorists,” is for the US military to train and assist the Afghan army to the point where US troops can leave the country. Such an objective has been very difficult to achieve for over a decade. In various regions throughout Afghanistan, the guerilla tactics of the Taliban have been reducing the efforts of the Afghan Army, to the point where the government of President Ashraf Ghani controls less than 57% of the country late last year, as compared to 72 percent a year earlier. The central government in Kabul is losing ground each year to the Taliban who are becoming more and more confident that they are gaining control in many regions throughout the country. They are relying on outlasting the US forces in their country, similar to the Soviet invasion in the 1980s. They know that the US one day will have to leave and have concluded that the foreign army will never win the battle to conquer the country as other invaders came to the same determination centuries ago.

Professor Gordon Adams who teaches foreign policy at American University in Washington noted that the US is not achieving much in Afghanistan and stays primarily as an exercise in face-saving.⁸ “No one wants to admit it’s not working,” he said. “No one wants to be the President who lost Afghanistan.” Mark Jacobson, an Army veteran and NATO’s former deputy representative in Kabul said recently that “I think there’s a relative certainty that the Afghan government would eventually fall.”⁹

For many critics of the US involvement in Afghanistan for close to two decades, is the question as to why the US attacked Afghanistan after 9/11 in the first place? Invaders of this country have not fared well historically. This includes Alexander the Great, Tamerlane, and the three British Afghan Wars of the 19th century.¹⁰ After eight years of war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Soviets also departed after failing to conquer the local inhabitants of the country. During this time, the US supplied the Mujahedeen with weapons and supplies who served as a proxy force for both the Pakistan and US interests against the Soviet forces. The significance to Pakistan is that

⁸ “Trump Shifts Course,” p. 1.

⁹ “America’s Afghanistan Strategy,” p. 1.

¹⁰ See K. F. Meyer and S. B. Brysac, “Tournament of Shadows,” *Counterpoint*, Washington DC, 1999. It has often been referred to as the “Graveyard of Empires,” D. Isby, *Afghanistan* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2010).

Afghanistan acts as a buffer in its ongoing conflict with India. After the Soviet army departed Afghanistan, the US was not particularly concerned with the civil war taking place between the Taliban, made up primarily of Pashtuns to the south and the mujahedeen to the north of the country.

After 9/11, President G. Bush and his administration determined that al-Qaeda must account for the disaster in New York. Afghanistan was cited as the focus of their attack since in 2001 the country was harbouring Osama Bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda and an international terrorist. President Trump in his recent pronouncement in his new strategy still referred to Afghanistan as a “haven” for terrorists. By December 2001, Bin Laden had fled Afghanistan to his refuge of Tora Bora in Pakistan. Instead of continuing their offensive in the region to contain al-Qaeda, the majority of US forces were transferred to Iraq to increase the troop deployment in that country. Several critics in the later US military involvement in Afghanistan question why the war is taking place against the Taliban instead of al-Qaeda who are recognized as the international terrorists. The Taliban and al-Qaeda were at one time supportive of one another at the tactical level, but certainly had different strategic objectives. It could be argued that the Taliban were fighting against the “infidel: invaders in their country; similar to their war against the Soviet Army, and did not participate in international terrorism, as did al-Qaeda. As noted by Isby, the Taliban were transformed in 1994 as a fundamentalist reaction to the failure of the post-Soviet mujahedeen government to bring either social justice or order.¹¹

The original pre-2001 Afghan Taliban had its roots in the refugee camps along the Pakistani border in the 1980s. The culture appeared to be a mixture of Pashtun tribal conservatism and Wahhabi fanaticism associated with support from Arabia and the Gulf. The Taliban stressed the power of the mullahs rather than the Pashtun balance of tribal, secular and religious authority.

Although it has been argued that the Taliban were welcomed by the population of Pashtun Afghanistan, the Taliban had to use armed force and persuasion to gain

¹¹ Ibid., p. 81.

power.¹² The Afghan Taliban believe the government in Kabul rightfully belongs to Pashtuns and not non-Pashtuns, infidel foreigners or takfir Afghans.

In the months leading up to 9/11, a cable from US officials noted: “the United States was not against the Taliban, per se [and] was not out to destroy the Taliban. The problem was Bin Laden. If he could be dealt with, US diplomats in the regions advised, “We would have a different kind of relationship.”¹³ After 9/11, the message to the Taliban leadership was significantly changed. It stated, “Every pillar of the Taliban regime will be destroyed – surrender Bin Laden or suffer the consequences.”¹⁴

US government plans in the autumn of 2001 were clear: “We should not agonize over post-Taliban arrangements. Defeating al-Qaeda and the Taliban was key: what happened afterwards could be worried about later.”¹⁵

Many persons have since questioned the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan instead of concentrating on the international terrorists, al-Qaeda or ISIS. Robert Gates, the former Secretary of Defense, wrote in his recent book:

Our lack of understanding of Afghanistan, its culture, its tribal and ethnic politics, its power brokers, and their relationships, was profound. After becoming Secretary of Defense twenty years later, I came to realize that in Afghanistan, as in Iraq, having decided to replace the regime, when it came to “with what”?, the American government had no idea what would follow.¹⁶

These experiences – these ghosts – led to my strong conviction, that the idea of creating a strong, democratic (as we would define it), more or less honest effective central government in Afghanistan, to change the culture, to build the economy and transform agriculture, was a fantasy.

¹² Ibid., p. 84.

¹³ P. Frankopan, *The Silk Roads* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), p. 482.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 483.

¹⁵ “U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan: Draft for Discussion,” *National Security Council Memorandum*, 16 October 2001, National Security Archive.

¹⁶ R. G. Gates, *Duty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), p. 336.

Ahmed Rashid has written a number of looks on the conflict in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He wrote:

most Afghans want US troops to leave but are divided between wanting a peace settlement and wanting to share power with the Taliban. While the Pashtuns favour a total US withdrawal and a deal with the Taliban, the non-Pashtuns in northern Afghanistan and many of the 5 million population of Kabul prefer to see the war continue until the Taliban are defeated. The new urban elite does not want to see the US abandon Afghanistan as the Soviets did after their withdrawal in 1989. Many Afghans fear that once the West leaves, their country will plunge back into civil war. ¹⁷

He then goes on to state:¹⁸

After a decade, NATO has achieved none of its strategic aims – rebuilding the Afghan state, defeating the Taliban, stabilizing the region. Despite grandiose plans for the transition, nobody in Washington or other capitals can agree upon or visualize what the ‘end state’ in Afghanistan will look like..... What will Afghanistan transition to? A stable, popular Afghan government or one that is mired in corruption and incompetence? A well-trained, fighting Afghan Army, or one that is high on drugs or illiterate. A stable police force or one whose desertion rate is the highest in the world? A functioning bureaucracy, judicial system, and ministries, or ones that hardly deliver services to the public, such as exist today? Even with the best outcome, the Afghan state will be a basket case, dependent on receiving over \$8 billion in aid each year just to maintain its army and bureaucracy. In 2010, the US spent \$11 billion on the Afghan security forces (ASF) – the largest single-ticket item in the US defense budget.¹⁹

Afghanistan has thirty-four provinces and seven that surround the capital Kabul. Rashad argued that increased western military activity destabilized the country and gave the Taliban a propaganda boost. Afghans were not used to a centralized government. Provinces or regions were controlled either by the Taliban or warlords who ran parallel governments, collected taxes, administered justice, and appointed local

¹⁷ As Rashad, *Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan* (New York: Viking Press, 2012), p. 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

leaders, sometimes just a few miles from the outskirts of Kabul.²⁰ In his book, Rashad argued that:

The Taliban remained firm that all foreign troops had to leave Afghanistan and that an Islamic system had to be restored to their country. Even though they had received extensive training, funding, and other support from al-Qaeda, both before and after 2001, they had now distanced themselves from them. Unlike other groups, the Afghan Taliban leadership had never sworn an oath of loyalty to al-Qaeda or Osama bin Laden, nor had they adopted al-Qaeda's global jihad agenda or helped train foreigners to become suicide bombers, as the Pakistani Taliban had done..... The Taliban stressed that they considered themselves Afghan nationalists and not global jihadists.²¹

Isby argues that the Taliban have to demonstrate that a continued foreign US presence in Afghanistan remains illegitimate and a threat to Islam and Afghan nationalism. They have accomplished this goal by embracing the theme that they are fighting a global war on Islam that has targeted their country. They also paint the picture that the government in Kabul is controlled by foreigners and non-Pashtuns and that the conflict caused by western military forces are continuing to cause civilian casualties and collateral damage.²²

The Taliban have also maintained in the past that the former Karzai government was corrupt and failed to provide effective governance or security. Rising crime in Kabul, Herat and other areas continues to this day in supporting the Taliban's legitimacy that they can provide security whereas the government in Kabul cannot.²³

Matthew Hol, the top US civilian official in Zabul Province noted: "We have special ops teams chasing after mid-level Taliban leaders who are not threatening the United States; who are only fighting us really because we're in their valley."²⁴

²⁰ Ibid., p. 108.

²¹ Ibid., p. 117.

²² Meyer and Brysac, *Tournament*, pp. 155-156.

²³ Ibid., p. 242.

²⁴ J. Scahill, *Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield* (New York: Nation Books, 2013), p. 333.

In 2016, Prime Minister Trudeau committed \$465 million over three years for aid and security in Afghanistan. It was the Liberal government in 2001 that first sent Canadian troops to that country and in 2003 to the dangerous Kandahar region.²⁵ By 2011, 158 Canadian soldiers had been killed in Afghanistan when Canada withdrew its combat role there.

Since then, there have been several critics in this country questioning why we are fighting the Taliban in the first place. Retired Major-General D. Fraser, the former Canadian Commander in Afghanistan, questioned the rationale for fighting the Taliban from the beginning of the military campaign.²⁶ Gwynne Dyer, the noted Canadian military historian, wrote:

However, no Taliban member has ever been involved in terrorist attacks abroad (except in Pakistan), and it is very much doubted that Osama bin Laden told the Taliban leaders that he was planning to launch the 9/11 attacks. It would have been a dangerous breach of security, and more important, it would have alarmed his hosts, who would have anticipated that they would be blamed for the attacks and invaded by American forces. A brief military incursion to destroy the al-Qaeda camp in Afghanistan might have made sense, but the continued military occupation of the entire country for thirteen years after the surviving al-Qaeda members have fled across the border into Pakistan, a much better base for their operations, was an expensive irrelevance.²⁷

In conclusion, you have to ask was there any strategic connection between the Taliban and al-Qaeda (AQ)? I believe there was not. AQ strategy was based on global jihad, while the Taliban's focus was domestic/national. However, both at the time (the Taliban almost exclusively) were Pashtun – the predominant cultural group in Afghanistan and in the tribal areas of Pakistan, so there were strong cultural connections. To the Pashtun, the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is not recognized. The Pashtun code of "Nanawatai" means that one is obliged to house those who are being persecuted. Regardless of whether there were any actual connections at the tactical end or not, two things linked the Taliban to AQ in the minds of US policy

²⁵ "Afghanistan's Shifting Sands," p. NP 1.

²⁶ "Regime Change not the Solution," *National Post*, February 24, 2016

²⁷ G. Dyer, *Canada in the Great Power Game: 1914-2014* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2014), p. 393.

makers. First, the US asked the Taliban to turn Bin Laden over to them. Because of the code mentioned above, they did not. Second, President Bush later determined that either you were a friend or an enemy, there were no neutrals. So by refusing to turn Bin Laden over, the Taliban were seen as the latter and part of the problem.

Mullah Omar was also convinced that the threats coming from Washington that there would be serious consequences if Bin Laden were not handed over were mostly bluster. He naively believed that United States would not launch a military operation in Afghanistan and there was a less than 10% chance that America would resort to anything beyond threats given US reaction to pre-9/11 terrorist attacks.

The connection between ISIL and the Taliban is mixed. ISIL-Afghanistan most likely links up with the Taliban when it comes to using established smuggling networks for people, weapons, etc. However, ISIL has been vocally opposed to the Taliban, with statements and propaganda videos questioning the legitimacy of the Taliban and accusing them of promoting the interests of Pakistan's ISI intelligence agency. The two groups actually declared war on each other in January 2015, and there have been violent skirmishes between both groups since then. There are now four predominant Sunni-Islamist groups in Afghanistan – AQ, the Taliban, the Haqqani Network and ISIL-Khorosan. Given the amount of domestic instability over the past thirty years, people will support whatever group can provide security, justice and let them earn a living. The total population have learned to flip-flop between groups in terms of local support just to survive.

One major concern which the US administration should consider is the possibility that ISIL could form the government in Kabul if the Taliban are defeated by US forces in the next several years. Although the Taliban to date have not been involved in secular disputes, ISIS certainly has been in waging conflict between the Sunnis and Shite factions throughout Afghanistan. There has been a historical reason that Afghanistan has been referred to as the "graveyard" of empires. No outside invaders or occupiers have managed to conquer this country for centuries. From the outset, NATO and the US wished to instill western democratic values with its "Rule of Law" and its human rights requirements. As noted by Isby: "The problem with democracy, however, is that the foreign supporters have packaged it in a way that includes much cultural

baggage that Afghans may not accept or find alien...The West has not aimed to present democracy in the forms that the Afghans have found appealing..."²⁸

Afghans for the most part are unfamiliar with a central government in Kabul. Many of the provinces and regions are controlled by the various ethnic clans who often are in conflict with the Taliban as well as Kabul.

What all the competing factions in the regions have in common against the central government in Kabul is that it is portrayed as corrupt and supported by foreign infidels. It allows the Taliban and others to hold themselves out as the protectors of Afghan culture, values and religion.

Even though President Trump signaled he will increase the number of US troops in Afghanistan, the Taliban believe that eventually the US will withdraw from the country, similar to the Soviet invasion, as Congress and the American public will no longer accede to continuing the war based on troop casualties and spiraling costs.

The Taliban's goal is restoration of their emirate throughout the entire country and to not participate in any elections or compromise with any other groups.²⁹ "The Taliban rely on tribal, personal kinship or family connections to sway the opinions of local Afghans. To the extent that they can provide work and security, they have the opportunity to legitimate their control and garner a modicum of loyalty in the absence of any real alternative."³⁰

President Trump declared his administration is continuing the fight against the Taliban terrorists even though the Afghan Army is continuing to lose control of regions through the country. Critics, as noted above, see the real terrorists internationally as al-Qaeda and ISIS instead of the Taliban who are interested in removing the foreign occupiers from their country. Their goal is not international terrorism, but to solidify their hold in governing all of Afghanistan.

As noted by Isby, "These men continue doing what has been their life since 1978: fighting against other Afghans and foreigners with the support of Pakistan intelligence

²⁸ Meyer and Brysac, *Tournament*, p. 243.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

services and outside Arab allies. To these Afghans, they are waging jihad, just as they did against the infidel Soviets and the takfir Islamic state of Afghanistan.”³¹

The US President has declared that, “conditions on the ground will determine the eventual strategy.” As noted earlier, it appears that the US is abandoning counterinsurgency strategy for counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan that will also include hit teams from JSOC and the CIA to remove Taliban leaders and initiate more drone strikes. It is argued that such operations do not gain the support of local Afghans, who see civilian casualties and collateral damage in their respective communities. A similar strategy in Iraq did not advance the support of the US in that country, in attempting to gain the support of the local and regional communities.

Many critics maintain that the Trump administration is going after the wrong international “terrorists” – which should be al-Qaeda or ISIS and not the Taliban. Possibly, the President and his military advisors should read the history of Afghanistan and why it has been called the “Graveyard of Empires.” The Taliban likely will outlast American intervention in Afghanistan – it is just a matter of time.

³¹ Ibid., p. 331.