Afghanistan Will Pay for NATO's Failures

[Series] If history is any guide, the legacy of the most recent international intervention will be the continuity of conflict in the lives of Afghans.

As we approach the 10th anniversary of the commencement of NATO's intervention in Afghanistan, The Mark begins a three-part series examining the outcomes and legacy of the Afghan war. Part 1 argues that the NATO military intervention has been a massive failure. It suggests that, with the war almost assuredly lost, Afghans are likely to face an all-too-familiar future of violent conflict.

As we pass the 10th anniversary of 9/11 and the beginning of the invasion of Afghanistan, just as NATO’s war begins to wind down, the legacy of the Afghanistan intervention is certain to become a hot topic of debate. A sober analysis of the failures of the intervention and its consequent implications for Afghanistan in a post-NATO landscape suggest the hope for any positive legacy is very bleak.

Of course, for the Afghans, the immediate legacy will be a continuation of the war, albeit in a different and likely much bloodier form. In 1919, French General Ferdinand Foch reacted to the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, which brought an end to the First World War, with the prophetic statement: "This is not a peace. It is an armistice for 20 years." The same could perhaps be said of the 2001 Bonn Agreement, which paved the way for a new western-backed Afghan regime in the aftermath of the ouster of the Taliban. In this case, however, the armistice period will likely be shorter.

Many of Afghanistan’s military commanders and powerbrokers have certainly treated this period of international intervention more as a break in the war than as a permanent peace. They may have dumped some of their old military equipment through UN-supported demilitarization schemes, but they have acquired new and better guns at the same time, all the while maintaining the integrity of their militias and patronage networks.
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NATO troops have indeed made some progress on the front lines of the insurgency in the South – even if civilian casualty levels continue to increase with each passing year, approaching somewhere between 12,500 and 14,700 since 2001. But with international troop withdrawals looming, and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) still not up to the task, any gains will be short-lived. Despite the investment of nearly $11 billion in the training of its forces each year, the ANSF is still not even close to being able to assume security responsibility for the entire country, making the 2014 handover date appear more fantasy than reality. While NATO public-affairs officials would no doubt respond by quoting seemingly impressive statistics on the number of police officers and soldiers trained and equipped – now up to 300,000 – the reality is far less encouraging.

The massive increases in international investment in the ANSF have still not enabled it to overcome some of the same fundamental problems it faced in 2003-04: endemic corruption and criminality; bad leadership; low morale; poor desertion and force retention rates; and insurgent infiltration.

A closer examination of the numbers paints a troubling picture: roughly one in seven members of the Afghan National Army (ANA) deserts every month; less than 20 per cent of the ANSF are literate; and only four Afghan National Army units (and no Afghan National Police units) are capable of operating independently, without NATO assistance. Even if the Afghan government could financially sustain the security sector being built for it, which realistic projections suggest it could not, it appears unlikely to last long in the post-NATO landscape.

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It is important to remember that there is a historical precedent for Afghan security forces fragmenting in the face of weakening external aid and support. When the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the Afghan security forces it constructed – which, in many ways, were more competent and professional than those that exist today – collapsed within three years, with many units defecting to the factional militia groups that would come to battle for control of the country.
A replay of this scenario appears increasingly possible in contemporary Afghanistan, and we know what the outcome was in the 1990s. The country descended into a brutal civil war in which the main mujahidin factions competed for control of the state, destroying it in the process, and individual warlords exploited the security vacuum to carve out mini-fiefdoms in the rural periphery. The chaos that ensued paved the way for a relatively unknown Kandahari Mullah to lead a militia group largely composed of madrassa students, with help from the Pakistani government and al-Qaeda, to capture the state.

How has bin Laden's death changed the war in Afghanistan? One expert weighs in.

The Taliban attacks in Kabul on Sept. 13, 2011, which involved multiple co-ordinated strikes culminating in a 20-hour gun battle in the heart of the most heavily fortified area of the country, typified the Taliban’s strategic shift and its continuing capability. The Taliban’s attacks were not intended to unseat the regime, drive out foreign forces, or even achieve a major tactical victory, but rather to deliver a psychological blow by proving that the Taliban has the ability to strike anywhere, and at any time. The attacks may have been, as U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker stated, little more than “harassment,” and “not a very big deal” from a tactical standpoint, but strategically, they delivered their intended message loud and clear.

One of the clearest signs that Afghanistan may be entering a new round of conflict is the exodus of many Afghan elites (along with their capital) from the country – both those who returned from exile in the wake of the Taliban’s fall, and, perhaps more disturbingly, those who remained in the country during the Soviet period, the civil war, and the Taliban regime. If neither the Soviets nor the Americans can stabilize Afghanistan, as the logic goes, then what hope is there? Many Afghans have already resigned themselves to the fact that the graveyard of empires has claimed another victim.

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Whatever the legacy of the failure in Afghanistan may be for its interveners (Canada among them), those interveners can walk away. The vast majority of Afghans, of course, cannot. With the absence of an effective state and a meaningful political reconciliation process, one can only hope that a further round of civil war – and the humanitarian disaster and international blowback it would undoubtedly unleash – can be avoided in Afghanistan. But history cautions us against such optimism.

With those who once provided large-scale international engagement pulling back due to war weariness and a deepening global recession, international leverage to prevent the resurgence of
Civil war is highly limited. The West will be reduced to a tragic spectator. And we know that Afghanistan’s neighbours – Iran, Pakistan, China, India, Russia, and the Central Asian states – will not sit idly by on the sidelines, which gives any new conflict a dangerous regional dimension. The Great Game for control of Afghanistan and Central Asia could be entering a dangerous new phase.

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