How the Afghan Mission Failed

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[Series] The spectre of protracted war looms large as the Taliban changes its tactics, looks beyond NATO's departure.

This is the second part of a three-part series examining the outcomes and legacy of the Afghan war. Part 1 outlined how the international intervention was lost, and described the grave consequences that that failure is likely to have for a people intimately familiar with war. Part 2 offers a focused discussion of what factors led to NATOs failure, and highlights why the resurgent Taliban, and the departing western forces, raise the spectre of a return to protracted war and violence in a post-NATO landscape.

One could say that the Afghan war was already lost by the time NATO had expanded in earnest across the country in 2006. Neglect and missteps early in the intervention, as well as errors of omission and commission, have reverberated throughout the decade-long state-building process and military mission, placing both on a rather precarious and shaky foundation.

Among those early mistakes was, first and foremost, the UN’s failure to authorize the expansion of a peacekeeping presence across the country in 2001-02, which was largely a result of U.S. objections. At the time, then-defense-secretary Donald Rumsfeld, among others, worried that a countrywide UN peacekeeping mission would interfere with U.S. counterterrorism operations, and potentially sap U.S. resources from the looming war in Iraq.

Second, a combination of grossly flawed assessments of the costs of reconstruction and the fact that some donor states (particularly the U.S.) were averse to nation-building produced a reconstruction effort advanced on the cheap and with a light footprint. By the time the Taliban were driven from power, the U.S. had already shifted its gaze to Iraq, leaving debilitating shortfalls in resources and initiative. Former UN envoy to Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi would later refer to
the light-footprint approach, which he presided over, as “original sin.”

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Third, the Afghan government and international donor community’s unwillingness to launch a legitimate peace process in order to draw opposition and spoiler groups like the Taliban in from the cold while they were still weakened and on the run was a missed opportunity. They chose, instead, a victor’s peace that disproportionately privileged some groups on the inside and alienated those on the outside.

A fourth factor was the failure to construct an effective regional strategy that could prevent the blatant interference of states like Pakistan, India, and Iran, while encouraging more constructive and beneficial co-operation.

Finally, there were the problems with strategy and resource shortfalls in the Afghan National Security Forces’ (ANSF) development process, which was always seen as the international community’s exit strategy and the key to long-term stabilization.

Combined, these factors seemed to stall Afghanistan’s transition process before it even got out of the starting gate, such that the country essentially lost two to three years in its transition. This is not to say that significant achievements have not been made, with major breakthroughs in health, education, and rural development. But what are schools and clinics without peace?

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The U.S. and its donor partners have drastically increased the flow of aid to Afghanistan over the past three to four years in an attempt to rectify its early neglect and create the minimum conditions for an “honourable” withdrawal. They are seeking, in particular, to boost ANSF development and stimulate a stillborn peace process. However, in their haste to paper over holes in the Afghan security sector and get the ANSF into the fight in advance of NATO’s departure, donors may have funnelled too much money into the system, leading to increased graft, leakage, waste, and mismanagement.
The ship has also probably sailed on Taliban reconciliation. After all, would you make a peace deal when you think you are winning, and when the other side has already announced a departure date? Probably not, and neither will the Taliban unless they are handed full control of most of the southern half of the country, which NATO and the Northern Alliance surely will not allow.

The Sept. 21 assassination of Burhanuddin Rabbani, a former Afghan president and leader of the Afghan High Peace Council, which was charged with spearheading Taliban talks, has struck a serious blow to peacemaking efforts. The killing of this leading Northern Alliance figure, which took place under the guise of peace negotiations with Taliban interlocutors, is probably the clearest sign yet of the Taliban’s growing disinterest in a negotiated settlement. Coming only months after the high-profile assassination of Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s half-brother, an influential former governor of Uruzgan Province and the mayor of Kandahar City, it will be difficult to contain impulses to abandon reconciliation and seek revenge.

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The recent shift in the Taliban strategy, from targeting NATO units on the frontlines to assassinating Afghan leaders and launching high-publicity terrorist operations, shows that the Taliban may already be looking beyond NATO. Decapitating the Karzai leadership and support base while shattering public faith in the state is a strategy aimed more at destabilizing the domestic regime than at driving out foreign infidels. It would appear that the stage is being set for a new phase of conflict.

Preventing this mutation and escalation of the conflict would take, at minimum, a Taliban power-sharing agreement, a regional non-interference and co-operation treaty, and an ironclad donor commitment to sustain current levels of aid for up to a generation. Although not impossible, under present circumstances this would seem highly improbable. Even in the best-case scenario, it appears that the most Afghans can hope for is a weak central government in Kabul with limited sovereignty outside of the capital, and a few major urban centers where warlords, the Taliban, and other factional actors will hold sway, with low-intensity violence as the norm. This is hardly the "end state" most Afghans and donors envisioned in Bonn, Germany, in December 2001, but it beats a return to all-out war.

The reality, though, is that over the next decade we may be talking about a different type of legacy for the Afghan mission – one that set in motion a chain of events that eventually triggered a second NATO-Afghan war.

*Photo courtesy of Reuters.*
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