What Went Wrong

The Story of America's Military Intervention in Afghanistan

By Edward Girardet

The American-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan is proving to be a failure. Against the advice of experienced diplomats, aid workers, journalists, and other analysts at the time, Washington's decision to invade the country in October 2001 in a "war on terrorism" ignored basic realities as well as history. A top-down military approach exhibiting often astounding hubris hindered efforts to implement a more modest—and savvy—long-term development strategy that could have ameliorated a conflict that was already in its twenty-second year when U.S. and coalition forces intervened. It has been a costly thirteen-year involvement in lives and resources, with very little to show in the way of resolving Afghanistan's problems. America's war in Afghanistan may be as undistinguished as the failed Soviet occupation from 1979 to 1989. Everything now depends on the ability of the Afghan army, police, and militia to hold their own—and whether the country will succeed in producing a thriving economy based on its own sweat and with a credible, broad-based political system.

Given the overwhelmingly artificial nature of Afghanistan's post-2001 economy, which has enriched more than a few U.S. security companies plus various Afghan politicians, warlords, and other members of the privileged elite, military downsizing is bound to be devastating to Afghan pocketbooks. In 2011, at the height of Operation Enduring Freedom, as Washington dubbed its involvement, the military occupation of Afghanistan, run by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), stood at over 140,000 troops operating out of 800-odd bases throughout the country. Kandahar in the southeast, Bagram north of Kabul, and Camp Bastion in Helmand had become three of the world's busiest military airfields: they handled hundreds of daily transport flights to Europe, the Middle East, and offshore aircraft carriers, as well as helicopter sorties against the Taliban and other insurgents.

◁ American troops awaiting takeoff from Bagram Airfield, Bagram, Jan. 29, 2013. *Yuri Kozyrev/NOOR/Redux*

By the end of 2013, the departure of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) incorporating forty-eight foreign armies, mainly from NATO, but also from countries such as Australia, Tonga, and Jordan, was well under way. Troops and equipment were being flown out daily, while ISAF and related military organizations had terminated most logistical contracts with private local and foreign companies. An indication of just how dependent Afghanistan had become on outside funding, this put more than 100,000 Afghans out of work and eliminated crucial income for up to two million dependents.

Foreign aid—mainly military assistance, and, to a far lesser extent, development aid—accounts for some 90 percent of Afghanistan's national budget. (The other principal form of income is illicit opium production, now at its highest level since large-scale production first began on Afghan soil in the mid-1980s.) According to the World Bank, Afghanistan will be incapable of surviving without foreign assistance until at least 2024—and then only if sustainable peace and security are achieved.

Afghanistan's future political stability is also a very open question. By August 2014, the bulk of ISAF's forces have pulled out and some 40,000 remained on the ground. They are leaving a country still at war. The United States and its coalition partners have failed to contain the insurgency. In that respect, much of Afghanistan is worse off today than following the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001. While guerrilla activities had traditionally focused on the southern and eastern regions, this war had spread to most of the country's thirty-four provinces by June 2011, when President Barack Obama announced plans for a coalition withdrawal.

Today, more than 70 percent of the country is still considered a "security zone," with many areas, such as Nuristan in the northeast and parts of Helmand and Kandahar provinces to the south, completely "no go"—meaning NATO, the United Nations, and international aid agencies believe it is too dangerous for foreigners, particularly relief workers. It is also considered too dangerous for Afghans affiliated with the government and any of the international organizations. While it seems unlikely that the Taliban and other insurgents will simply retake the country as is often predicted, it is clear that there has to be a political solution if fighting is to be brought to an end. Certain elements within the armed opposition recognize this and have indicated their willingness to talk and even participate in a political sharing process. Others have not. In 2013, the Taliban and Afghan government had attempted to wager a peace deal in Qatar to bring security in the lead up to the presidential elections. But before the Doha talks could begin, they were cancelled for the time being due to the emergence of a Taliban office in the Qatari capital bearing a Taliban banner and flag. While the talks are not discontinued, they are not going anywhere at the moment. There is also suspicion among pro-Kabul representatives that the Pakistanis (who are involved in the talks) cannot be trusted as they are still playing a

double game with select intelligence agency support for the Taliban, while Islamabad officially maintains a 'non-interference' policy with Afghanistan itself. Meanwhile, there is support for the international community in trying to bring an end to the war. Switzerland, notably Geneva, is often mentioned as a possible neutral arbiter to have real talks. Another is Iceland.

With NATO out of the picture, 2015 will be a critical test of the effectiveness of the 352,000-strong Afghan security forces. Another challenge is whether Afghans will retain confidence in the Kabul government. After the vote rigging and backroom deals in the 2014 presidential election, the outlook is not promising.

As part of the withdrawal, the coalition armies are taking most of their weapons and equipment, including thousands of trucks, armored personnel carriers, helicopters, and fixed-wing aircraft. The Germans, for example, who were first deployed to Kunduz in northern Afghanistan in the early 2000s, are handing over very little. As part of a zero-footprint policy (highly unpopular with Afghans, as it meant few local jobs), they had brought in everything, including their own food and Filipino cooks. They are now flying everything out, even their human waste. When the German troops first arrived in Kunduz, there was no war there. Now, Kunduz is under increasing attack by the Taliban, Hezb-e-Islami, and other insurgents.

The departing armies are only leaving what is considered necessary to equip the Afghan army and police. One fear is that excess weapons and ammunition will find its way onto the black market, or to the insurgents. Yet the poorly trained and largely unreliable police, who constitute nearly half the country's security forces, lack appropriate weapons to fight the well-equipped insurgents, who possess mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, heavy machine guns, high-tech communications equipment, and outside intelligence.

To tide them over, NATO has pledged $4.1 billion a year to the Afghan security forces. No one knows to what extent this support will continue once the Western armies are gone. Most NATO bases taken over by Afghans have emerged as little more than empty barracks with office desks, filing cabinets, and generators. In many ways, it is looking more like a replay of the Red Army withdrawal at the end of the 1980s. For many Afghans, including some who have been critical of the NATO occupation, there is fear that the West is abandoning them once again.

Most donor countries claim that, even with reduced aid levels, they will not drop Afghanistan as the Americans did in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal. The extreme short-sightedness in the late 1980s, after the U.S. strongly supported the mujahideen against Soviet forces at the end of the Cold War, led to renewed civil war in Afghanistan, the rise of the Taliban and, indirectly, the September 11 attacks by Al-Qaeda. The United States, Britain, and a few other countries have asserted that they will provide limited

military backing, at least until the end of 2016. For their part, while steadily stepping up their war against Kabul, the insurgents have made clear that they have time on their side. They can wait for the foreigners to depart and the money to dry up.

The United States says that it will retain up to 10,000 soldiers, primarily for training and logistical assistance. These troops, which include special forces, will also intervene on behalf of the Afghan army and police "if and when needed." British and other NATO armies are expected to leave 12,000 soldiers at most. And these numbers will probably be whittled down to a few hundred, primarily trainers and advisors, within two or three years.

What happens after 2016 is another matter. Up for discussion is Western access to a handful of military bases, which would provide a logistical foothold for emergencies, not just in Afghanistan but also in Pakistan and Iran. Given recent Russian expansionism in the Ukraine, there is now concern that Moscow may reassert its aspirations in the former Soviet Central Asian republics. For the moment, Pakistan is deemed far more precarious than Afghanistan with the rise of local Taliban and other extremists, many cultivated by Islamabad's powerful spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The United States has been training American special forces of South Asian background in Pashto and tribal cultural awareness at a center in Montana ostensibly for Afghanistan but almost certainly also for cross-border operations.

The Afghan security forces are now in the process of trying to retain government-controlled areas without the help of Western troops. Last summer, the Afghans engaged insurgents on average 150 times a day in twenty provinces. In some areas, the Taliban are being supported by foreign fighters who fled Pakistan's June 2014 offensive against guerrilla strongholds in North Waziristan, along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. A worry is that further Pakistani crackdowns will encourage foreign Islamic groups to re-establish a presence in Afghanistan.

Both sides have suffered significant losses, but some Afghan government units have fared far better than expected. In many parts, the Taliban are failing to regain territory evacuated by NATO. At the same time, the insurgents have been stepping up their use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide attacks in combination with frontal assaults on government positions such as police stations. These have produced staggering casualties.

As a fighting force, even if doing relatively well now, the Afghan army, police, and militia support groups will still need to prove that they are capable in the long-term. The desertion rate remains high, and police are notoriously corrupt. Various units are known to have made their own deals with the insurgents. So-called green-on-blue attacks—Afghan army or police killing their own including coalition troops—appear to be on the increase.

Avoidable Mistakes

Afghanistan is America's longest war. But it is only the latest phase in a conflict that is now in its thirty-sixth year, having begun in 1978 when communists overthrew President Mohammad Daoud Khan's regime in Kabul. Washington's initial involvement began when the Central Intelligence Agency started supporting the mujahideen in mid-1979 with limited weapons and funding, a commitment that eventually grew to more than $600 million a year by 1986.

When compared to the nearly decade-long Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the American-NATO phase has seen significantly fewer casualties, both military and civilian. During the communist period before the Soviet invasion, the regime of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) used increasingly repressive methods in a bid to put down fast-spreading revolt. This included brutal atrocities, such as the Kerala massacre in April 1979, in which 1,173 allegedly pro-mujahideen men and boys were machine-gunned to death.

However, it was during the Red Army occupation, from December 1979 to February 1989, that Afghanistan suffered its most devastating losses. Up to 1.5 million Afghans are believed to have died, while a further five million were forced to flee the country in what human rights groups have described as "migratory genocide." According to recent estimates, as many as 25,000 Soviet troops died in the conflict. In contrast, since October 2001 an estimated 20,000 civilians have died in fighting. Nearly 3,500 coalition troops, including about 2,340 Americans, have been killed in Afghanistan. More than 13,000 Afghan military, police, and organized militia are believed to have died.

One of the reasons for NATO's lower casualties is an approach that differed from that of the Soviet occupiers. Despite using military means to counter insurgent activities, NATO has not sought to make local populations suffer for their support—or fear—of the Taliban. As part of the Bonn Agreement in December 2001, the West also pledged to help Afghanistan back on the road to economic recovery. This was supposed to be part of Moscow's eventual strategy once the resistance was subdued, but in practice the Soviets focused more on destroying than on building.

Moscow's policy of migratory genocide created the world's largest refugee crisis. Thousands of Afghans suspected of opposing the regime were arrested, tortured, and murdered. An estimated 22,000 villages were eradicated or severely damaged. Not only were farmers forced to abandon whole swathes of countryside, but they were also unable to maintain their fragile agricultural systems, such as irrigation canals. If ordinary Afghans had wished to remain, they would have had to accept Kabul's rule.

There are no reliable figures for casualties among today's armed opposition despite the body counts issued by ISAF and the Kabul government. Most estimates put Taliban and other insurgency losses, including foreign fighters, at between 20,000 to

35,000 dead. The majority have been killed in military counter-insurgency operations, such as ground offensives and aerial or drone strikes. As in the Vietnam and Algeria wars, there is often confusion as to who is an insurgent and who is not. Mujahideen losses during the Soviet war were thought to number well over 100,000.

When the administration of President George W. Bush, with the backing of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, opted to invade Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, its decision was based largely on an emotional response to punish the Taliban for the September 11 attacks on the United States a month earlier. Amid an atmosphere of McCarthyism, few in the United States dared question what was considered to be America's right to respond with massive force. As far as Washington was concerned, the Taliban and their Al-Qaeda backers were one and the same.

The fact that Saudis, Pakistanis, and even Americans had been supporting the Taliban did not enter the equation. In April 2001 the Bush administration itself made a $43 million grant to the Taliban government for supposedly cracking down on poppy cultivation—the reality had more to do with the secret stockpiling of opium to reduce availability and raise prices—while the administration ignored warnings that Arab jihadists were preparing a massive terror operation against the United States. Private American oil interests, notably the Union Oil Company of California, whose consultants included Zalmay Khalilzad, later to become Washington's ambassador in Kabul, also sought to make deals with the Taliban.

Ahmed Shah Massoud, the northern leader who was assassinated by Al-Qaeda suicide bombers two days before the 9/11 attacks in order to rid Afghanistan of its last key opposition figure to Taliban rule, had personally briefed American officials on the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan while in Paris in the spring of 2001—by then he had lost severely to the Taliban who were in control of up to 80 percent of the country. He wanted more weapons, ammunition and other forms of support. At the time, only the Russians (ironically) and the Indians were backing him. He briefed the Americans on the political initiative that he and Abdul Haq—a fellow prominent Afghan resistance commander killed by the Taliban in 2001—were pushing, and stressed the need to involve the ex-king as figurehead leader and the only Afghan who could command nationwide respect. Massoud specifically noted that the Taliban were already in the process of imploding. And finally, he warned the Americans about Al-Qaeda and other mainly Arab activities in Afghanistan, noting that a major operation was being planned against the United States. Massoud criticized the United States for backing the Taliban and also for condoning ISI's involvement with the Taliban, which came in the form of funding, military advisors, helicopter and jet fighter support, and on-the-ground troops (officially referred to as retired military "volunteers"). Riyadh and Arab jihadist groups also furnished financial and logistical backing. When the United

States invaded, American troops faced the awkward task of evacuating erstwhile allies—Pakistani and other foreign military personnel—from Afghanistan.

Obsessed by political expedience, Washington failed to understand that it was intervening in a civil war with the Taliban on one side, and Massoud's Northern Alliance (officially the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan) on the other. The Taliban were not a terrorist force, but rather an Afghan political movement little different from that of a group that the United States and Pakistan had backed in the 1980s—the Hezb faction of Pashtun religious extremist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

The overwhelming majority of Taliban were uneducated militants, certainly not the "scholars" that the term *talib* suggests. Many, too, were former mujahideen with fighting experience from the jihad days. Few had any idea where America, let alone New York, was situated. Even the movement's more privileged leadership under Mullah Omar had little or no control over Al-Qaeda operatives. Yet, in true Afghan fashion, they were completely prepared to be bought by Al-Qaeda for funds, weapons, and other forms of support.

From Washington's point of view, anyone aiding and abetting the Taliban were considered either "unlawful combatants" (a term that does not exist under the Geneva Conventions) or "terrorists." This included Islamic volunteers from Britain, Germany, and the United States, notably Californian John Walker Lindh, who had come to help the Taliban prior to the events of 9/11—just as various Americans and Europeans had supported the mujahideen during the 1980s. Conveniently, the Bush administration did not regard any official Pakistani or Saudi collaboration with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda as unlawful.

The U.S.-led military campaign quickly routed the Taliban in favor of the Northern Alliance. Thousands of Taliban were captured or killed, while thousands more fled or went to ground. Coalition operations also killed or put to flight hundreds of Al-Qaeda operatives. The Americans, however, failed to achieve their principal objective of capturing or killing Osama bin Laden (who was eventually hunted down in Abbottabad, Pakistan, and killed by U.S. special forces on May 2, 2011). They also completely failed to destroy the Taliban as a movement. The bulk of the Taliban, including foreign operatives, simply evaporated into countryside or across the border into Pakistan.

By 2003, the Taliban and other insurgent groups, such as Hekmatyar's Hezb, and the Haqqani network, had begun to re-establish themselves, primarily in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan. It was this rapid re-emergence of the Taliban that prompted the U.S. and other coalition forces to step up their military commitment to Afghanistan.

Many Afghans initially welcomed the Western intervention. In the northern and western parts of Afghanistan, many Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks had suffered at the

hands of the Taliban. Because the Taliban brutally repressed anyone who questioned their dominance, their villages had been burned or otherwise destroyed, or their fruit orchards and crops uprooted; there were also rapes, forced marriages, brutal beatings, and executions.

At the same time, many Afghans expressed a distinct unease with the U.S. military presence. For some, there was no difference between the Soviet intervention on behalf of the PDPA regime and the U.S. invasion to help the Northern Alliance. Among those holding this view was Jalaluddin Haqqani, a Pashtun nationalist and founder of the Haqqani network. During the Soviet war, he had embraced U.S. support against the Red invaders; but when the Americans arrived after 9/11, he perceived them as foreign occupiers who, just like the Soviets, had to be driven out.

The conference in Bonn attended by Afghan leaders in December 2001 appointed Hamid Karzai, a charming but light-weight former resistance public relations officer, as leader of the Afghan Interim Authority; it also launched a national economic recovery plan. Exhausted by so many years of war, what Afghans did not want was more fighting. Nor did they want discredited former jihadists or warlords. Effective rule of law, including a justice system that was not corrupt, was a further concern. Above all, however, Afghans wanted a say in a process that would enable people to return to their homes, even if it meant being run by an interim United Nations administration.

The Americans initially agreed with this approach. However, beset by what can only be regarded as extraordinary arrogance, general incompetence, and poor intelligence, Washington failed to take into account a number of key tenets.

Prior to the invasion, the United States committed its first major mistake by not recognizing the potential of an existing process toward a broad-based political solution led by former resistance commanders, notably Massoud and Abdul Haq. Together with well-informed Westerners, they consistently advised Washington not to get militarily involved in Afghanistan. Even if a political approach might take several more years to achieve, they maintained, it was better than war.

Since late 2000, there had been signs of rising frustration and dissent within the Taliban. Some felt that the group was beginning to implode. Numerous Taliban commanders were becoming disillusioned with the way the Pakistanis, Saudis, and other outsiders were seeking to dominate events. Al-Qaeda was operating as if it owned Afghan territory, while the Pakistanis had permeated the country with advisors and on-the-ground military personnel.

By early 2001, up to half of these Taliban commanders, many of whom had known each other during the anti-Soviet jihad, were indicating a readiness to join an anti-Taliban alliance of Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and other fighters together with Massoud and Haq; the former a Tajik, the latter a Pashtun. While not necessarily the best of

friends, both men had often collaborated in the past. They had long recognized that the only way to bring peace was through political consensus in the Afghan way, not a process imposed from the outside.

One highly crucial aspect was the involvement of former Afghan king, Zahir Shah, who was in exile in Rome. While no great monarch during his long reign, he represented a nostalgic memory of peace, which is what the overwhelming majority of Afghans wanted, and still want today. Even if only a figurehead leader, Zahir Shah was the sole Afghan capable of commanding nation-wide ethnic and tribal support.

The Americans and British ignored these political overtures, particularly after the events of 9/11. With Massoud's death, Haq sought to continue with the process, repeatedly urging the Americans not to intervene militarily. With the U.S. invasion underway, Haq remained in Afghanistan trying to solicit support. Probably with ISI connivance, he was betrayed and surrounded by the Taliban. Washington was aware of Haq's predicament, but refused to order special forces to step in. Having chosen Hamid Karzai as its man in Kabul, they did not want Haq, a widely revered Pashtun moderate loathed by the Pakistanis, to spoil their show. Haq was captured and executed. As a result, the West lost another of its many opportunities to achieve a peaceful solution.

A further serious miscalculation was to allow former jihadists and warlords, carrying their weapons, into the June 2002 loya jirga, or grand assembly, in Kabul. These men promptly intimidated and largely assumed control of the gathering simply with their presence. In the same vein, the West pushed Karzai rather than Zahir, who would have commanded crucial support, even among the Taliban. With only a few years left in his life—he would die in 2007 at age 92—Zahir could have served as interim leader for a broader peace process in conjunction with a UN-backed interim administration. For many ordinary Afghans, particularly women, the loya jirga was their chance to launch a new beginning. Many left disappointed.

Afghans were soon dismissing the Bonn process as a Westernized top-down, Kabul-centric form of government—a system widely regarded as out-of-touch, corrupt, and only benefitting the privileged. Too many Kabul-appointed governors, some of them favored and supported by NATO forces, were little more than mafia-style thugs seeking to enrich themselves. Later, presidential elections in 2004, 2009, and 2014 also largely failed because of rampant graft, the rigging of results, and the favoring of powerful elites.

Throughout 2002 leading into 2003, the new ISAF troops were relatively well-regarded. British soldiers regularly operated foot patrols wearing berets rather than helmets; the Brits designated speakers to greet ordinary Afghans while other troops monitored the surroundings. American forces, on the other hand, would only patrol in heavy armor and in vehicles. They also treated Afghans with deep suspicion and

fear, and always at the end of gun. The hiring, too, of foreign mercenaries—military contractors—who had no accountability and often abused locals with astounding rudeness, did little to enhance public perception of these foreign armies. In time, Afghans regarded NATO soldiers as yet another foreign occupation force.

By 2004, Washington's emphasis on a military rather than a development approach was only leading to a steadily expanding war. The Taliban and other armed opposition groups were fast re-emerging, and the only solution offered by U.S. generals, who were running the show from ISAF headquarters, was to step up counter-insurgency operations. Every year, more foreign troops were deployed, losing more soldiers in the process and achieving few results.

Arab Afghans

A key factor in the West's failure was a refusal to learn the lessons of history. While one could go back several millennia, a look at the 175 years of Afghan history will suffice. There were clear reasons why the British failed in their attempts to control Afghanistan during the First Anglo-Afghan War, which resulted in the nigh annihilation of their nearly 14,500-16,000-strong expeditionary force in 1842. This was followed by two more largely ineffective punitive efforts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ultimately leaving British India with the conclusion that, while it could influence Kabul's foreign policy, it could certainly not control Afghans on the inside.

The principal lesson learned, as one British NATO colonel put it to me at Bagram Airfield in early 2002, was "never occupy Afghanistan." Nor, he may as well have added, should any foreigner, whether British, Russian, Pakistani, Arab, American or European, ever assume that he can control both this country and its people. Even Afghans have long discovered that political interests will always remain beholden to fickle alliances that can change with staggering alacrity. All depends on local, clan, tribal, and regional loyalties, government payoffs, threats, or whatever happens to be in the best interests of a particular grouping or community at the time. Nothing ever goes to plan.

The Soviets had ignored history with their December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. Moscow tried to operate with a 115,000-strong occupation force—well supported, it would seem, by road, rail, and air from Red Army bases and another 30,000 troops north of the border in Central Asia. It also sought to promote the highly unpopular PDPA regime, riddled with factional infighting and ethnic tensions.

The Soviets and their Afghan cohorts used a combination of brute repression, bribes, well-stocked subsidized wheat in the bazaars, and, to a lesser degree, development initiatives, mainly in urban areas, to persuade ordinary Afghans to accept their dominance. But their massive bombings and ground assaults combined with the

actions of the hated Khad state intelligence agency, coupled with well-paid local militia, only contributed toward engendering further sympathy for the resistance.

Furthermore, the Red Army found itself dealing with a disparate guerrilla movement involving some 200 local or regional resistance fronts. These operated independently of each other, but also sometimes in coordination as part of loose alliances among different—and increasingly effective—resistance commanders, such as Massoud to the north, Haq to the east, Ismail Khan to the west, and Haqqani to the southeast.

The Taliban and other opposition groups today are much the same. While portraying itself as a movement with Mullah Omar as its spiritual leader, each Talib insurgent front operates much on its own, while accepting the broad sweeps of Taliban direction. Some have embraced harsh, often indiscriminate military approaches, killing innocent Afghans in the process. Despite eroding Taliban support in many areas, such tactics also instill fear and forces acquiescence to their rule. Other commanders are extremely careful about maintaining good relations with local Afghans. They also offer a form of sharia justice, which many, including government and NATO employees, prefer to the corrupt Kabul version, where only money decides.

The Soviets soon realized that they could not control the countryside given the ability of the mujahideen to walk right across the Hindu Kush with weapons and ammunition brought in from Pakistan or Iran, and then to operate at will among the mountains and deserts. Even with their drones, U.S. forces today have proved incapable of fully interdicting guerrilla movement. While the Red Army gradually improved and adapted their tactics—such as with the use of heliborne elite Spetsnaz forces—so did the guerrillas, who soon received better and more weapons, which from 1986 onwards, included the highly destructive Stinger missile.

Soviet efforts to bolster the PDPA regime backfired even though massive efforts toward the end of the occupation to buy off tribal leaders in resistance areas appeared to be making headway. The much-publicized communist "Fatherland" initiative, which included the formation of paid militia to protect villages (an idea later copied by NATO), succeeded in worrying the mujahideen enough to form a resistance government. But once Moscow no longer had the funds to pay salaries, these hired guns simply supported the highest bidders, including the new drug lords.

Loyalty has always been a problem in Afghanistan. During the Soviet period, most party militants and military stuck with them not because of ideology, but rather because of privileges, money, and protection for their families. In fact, the ministries, including military and police ranks, were thoroughly infiltrated by the mujahideen. Both Massoud and Hekmatyar had senior army and air force officers working closely in government bodies.

The situation is not much different in 2014. Soldiers, police, and civil servants need to play all sides as a matter of survival. Everyone seems to have a family member who

is in the Taliban, while another works for the government. The Taliban, Hezb, and Haqqani network all have their own people in Kabul and the provincial governments. Many Afghans, too, are grabbing what they can from the system but are also prepared to leave once things start going to hell. Many, including several key Afghan generals, already have bolt holes in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and elsewhere.

Following the Soviet pullout, the PDPA forces managed to hold on for another three years—that is, for as long as the funds lasted. As soon as the money dried up, everything collapsed. Mid- and senior-level party members disappeared or slipped over to the former resistance parties. Members of the mainly Pashtun Ministry of Interior moved over to Hekmatyar's Hezb, while those involved with the Tajik-dominated ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs opted for what later became the Northern Alliance under Massoud.

With the Soviets gone, matters became still worse after the United States and its European allies, having helped defeat the Soviets, abandoned the country. As history has shown, one cannot play the field and then withdraw without repercussions. Both the Saudis and Pakistan's manipulative ISI continued to back Hekmatyar, but then switched to the Taliban when the latter proved to be the wave of the future. War-fatigued Afghans initially welcomed the Taliban because of their ability to instill law and order, but turned against them when mainly southern Pashtuns sought to impose their own highly restrictive form of sharia.

Another blowback today from the 1980s is the indiscriminate support provided by both the United States and Pakistan to leading Islamic fundamentalists within the mujahideen, such as Hekmatyar and Haqqani. By allowing ISI to channel the bulk of U.S. arms and funds to Hezb, the Americans created monsters who would come back to haunt them.

By 2002, Washington's former ally Hekmatyar had returned from Iranian exile in support of the Taliban cause, but ultimately for his own political interests. The CIA tried to kill him, but failed, in the spring of 2002. In 2014, Hekmatyar still ranks as a leading, anti-coalition insurgent responsible for numerous IED attacks. In early September 2014, the BBC reported Hezb's intention to join the cause of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This indicated a new globalization of the conflict, which might give cause to both Washington and its NATO allies to re-consider their disengagement from Afghanistan.

Such internationalization of radical Islam is nothing new. During the 1980s, several thousand foreign Islamic fighters from Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, and even Germany flocked in to help. Clearly, many were not there for the Afghans, but rather to benefit from the experience given that Afghanistan was the only active jihad in the world. One of these foreign fighters was Osama bin Laden (who I encountered twice in Kunar province during the last days of the Soviet occupation).

Many of these veteran "Afghanis" later headed off to North Africa, the Middle East, and the Balkans, and with them went a radical program of political Islam. They sought to promote the spreading of jihad to all points of the earth. Some of the more experienced ISIS commanders today are believed to have had their first test of combat—and brutality—in Afghanistan. It was partially this ruthlessness, notably the execution by the slitting of throats—a very un-Afghan form of killing—of scores of PDPA prisoners by Arab jihadists that prompted the government to fight so hard once Red Army troops had gone.

Costs of Intervention

In spite of the positive spin Washington, London, or Brussels may put on the Afghan war, it is fair to question whether it has been worth the lives lost and the billions of dollars spent, especially given that other and arguably more viable options were available to policymakers. It is increasingly apparent that a security-based strategy has not achieved much. Even a fraction of the more than $496 billion spent by the U.S. military—not including what the other allies have contributed—could have been used more effectively on intelligent, more carefully tailored development and investment initiatives. Real recovery, such as building roads or creating jobs in rural areas, is a far better strategy.

Today's international community, in contrast with the Soviet occupation, has sought to implement national development programs. But much of this has been undermined by the war. Relations with the local population were severely compromised by the manner with which the Americans and their allies have killed or otherwise arrested suspected insurgents, or terrorists, often incarcerating them without due process in detention centers at Guantanamo Bay, Bagram, and elsewhere.

Since 2004, the Americans pointedly have sought to eliminate guerrilla operatives, whether inside Afghanistan or along Pakistan's border tribal areas, through drone attacks. From a military point of view, these kills might seem exceptionally successful, but as a means of promoting eventual reconciliation, however, they have been remarkably myopic. These unmanned aerial assaults have been killing the very leaders with whom the West needs to negotiate if there is to be a peaceful solution. Many who have replaced these traditional leaders are young, hard line, and almost entirely indoctrinated by the jihadist cause, often with websites openly backing the ISIS cause.

As part of guerrilla strategy, the Taliban's methods are not much different from those of the mujahideen—multi-assaults combined with inside collaboration. However, there is one major difference, notably the use of IEDs. Apart from Chinese landmines or artillery shells placed in roads to blow up passing Soviet tanks, the mujahideen never used IEDs. Nor did they recruit suicide bombers, now a common element of insurgent assaults.

These indiscriminate forms of guerrilla warfare are foreign imports, primarily introduced into Afghanistan by Arab and Chechen jihadists. Since 2004, up to half the NATO and Afghan government casualties have been inflicted by suicide bombers or IEDs placed along roads, in bazaars, or in areas frequented by government or NATO forces. Often, too, IEDs have been deliberately used to terrorize the local population.

Furthermore, unlike in the Soviet war, today's insurgency is no longer operating in comparative isolation. It is in constant contact via social media with guerrilla operatives elsewhere, such as in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. IED methods are being constantly updated. The Taliban and other groups have become Internet-savvy with the posting of attacks on YouTube. By routinely videoing these assaults, often from multiple angles, they can counter government claims of victory or promote their own PR interests. Furthermore, they serve as live instruction manuals.

Observers are particularly critical of the manner with which U.S. and British forces have sought to occupy hard-fought villages or positions, sometimes with great loss of life, for a week or two, only to see them fall back into insurgent hands as soon as they pull out. Such pointlessness was aptly conveyed in the U.S.-British documentary *Restrepo*, which tells the story of how American troops held a village in the Korengal Valley for nearly a year. One U.S. soldier was killed and the mission served absolutely no military purpose whatsoever. The highly publicized 2010 Marja ground assault in Helmand is another example. Not unlike the massive 12,000-strong Soviet-Afghan offensive against the Panjshir Valley in 1982, it achieved little other than to contain the insurgents temporarily. While some were killed, others simply buried their weapons and disappeared, or headed off to fight elsewhere.

It is hard for NATO to argue that it is leaving Afghanistan a better place, or that the mission has succeeded in thwarting international terrorism. Jihadist training camps are likely to reappear in the Afghan landscape. Even with reliable on-the-ground intelligence coupled with satellite or drone monitoring and clandestine special forces operating from Afghan military bases, such activities will prove hard to contain once most foreign troops are gone. All that NATO has really achieved is an extremely expensive holding operation.

For anyone familiar with the nature of guerrilla warfare, America's "war on terrorism" against the Taliban and other guerrilla fronts has failed, primarily because it has not won. It was much the same for Soviets when they proved incapable of quashing the Afghan resistance. In his war against the Soviets, Massoud, an avid reader of military history, sought to incorporate some of the lessons learned from past guerrilla conflicts, such as Tito's war against the Nazis (and rival Yugoslavs), General Giap's in Vietnam, and the Front de Libération Nationale's in Algeria. He adopted many of their tactics, which, in turn, have been adopted—or perfected—by the Taliban.

To have any decisive impact against an insurgency, the soldier-guerrilla ratio must be 10:1. At best, NATO maintained a 5:1 ratio, and even then, the bulk of its troops have operated in a logistical support capacity. Barely 25,000–30,000 U.S., British and other coalition soldiers were trained in counter-insurgency tactics.

Furthermore, America's war in Iraq in 2003 led Washington to lose its focus in Afghanistan. This blurred its ability to carefully think through the process, and to decide what the best way forward was to bring about real recovery combined with effective security.

Whether by default or deliberate policy, Washington let the generals call the shots. This included decisions such as the deployment of soldiers as aid workers in the form of "Provincial Reconstruction Teams" (PRTs) designed to combine "hearts and minds" efforts with military clout. Funded primarily by the U.S. Agency for International Development and the British Department for International Development, they dug wells, built schools, constructed bridges, and otherwise involved themselves with local development.

The problem was that the PRTs were military and not humanitarian operations. They were perceived as soldiers and their presence often undermined the neutrality of aid workers. In some areas, too, such as the German PRTs in northern Afghanistan, they only contributed toward attracting insurgent attention. Even more crucial, the PRT soldiers lacked appropriate local knowledge. For example, the management and use of water sources in Afghanistan is based on hundreds of years of tradition. The digging of some PRT wells, which were always good PR for visiting television crews or ISAF information sites, caused rising salination because of excessive water depletion. As Anthony Fitzherbert, a leading British agriculturalist pointed out, "there is a reason why there was no well in the first place."

The PRT teams, which doubled as intelligence-gathering operatives, were also hampered by six-month deployment rotations. There was little institutional memory. Much depended on the ability of new officers to carry on with what their predecessors had learned. When the PRTs began pulling out from southern and eastern Afghanistan in 2012 and 2013, many programs and their funding collapsed. As with much of the West's military approach, there was no long-term vision.

NATO forces also found themselves involved in another war: U.S. and British counter-narcotics operations in a bid to eliminate, or least reduce, opium poppy cultivation. One reason for this was to deny the Taliban a major source of income. This interdiction involved a highly unpopular combination of foreign troops, Afghan security forces, armed U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration operatives, mercenaries, and militia.

The strategy, which failed to compensate local farmers and openly benefitted those with government ties, including at least a handful of regional warlords and governors, turned many Afghans against the Kabul regime. A far better idea would have been to

focus with less money on a more astute, imaginative, and practical basket of agricultural outreach programs as a means of creating a more viable economy.

Cautionary Tale

While the U.S.-led invasion was initially widely supported, the occupation began to lose popular support the longer foreign troops remained. Part of this animosity was the result of the growing numbers of Afghans killed in NATO bombings, ground operations, or shootings, regardless whether deliberate or accidental. To their credit, NATO forces have sought to investigate—and compensate—wherever possible, but public apologies and blood money are rarely sufficient.

A further problem was the manner with which many occupation troops—and foreign mercenaries—interacted with Afghans. This ranged from blatant lack of cultural sensitivity, such as rudeness at road blocks or in the bazaars, male soldiers checking female travelers, or the failure to remove sunglasses when talking with Afghans, thus preventing crucial polite eye contact.

With America's generals running the show, it was security rather than recovery that dominated. Not only did this military approach undermine the more urgent need for effective development and investment, it inadvertently led to a return of the Taliban.

The Pentagon also ignored warnings that any attempts to deal with Afghanistan should not involve the dumping of massive amounts of funding. As aid analysts noted, any recovery strategy should be based on a carefully implemented twenty- to thirty-year approach. There could be no quick fixes. Furthermore, the focus should be on well-informed development in provincial towns and the countryside, where over 70 percent of Afghans live. Furthermore, a no-brainer, it would come at a fraction of the cost, perhaps 1–2 percent of overall military expenditure.

The policy proved to be far different. The UN, European Union, World Bank, ISAF, and other members of the international community allowed Kabul to be turned into an artificial, bright-lights magnet with over-the-top infrastructure. As with most major players, NATO brought in expat Afghans, such as doctors and engineers, as interpreters at exorbitant salaries, often four or five times the going rate, thus denying the country the very local expertise it needed to bring about sustainable recovery.

The end result was that overwhelming numbers of returnees and job-seekers converged on the Afghan capital. In just over a decade, the population almost tripled to more than three million. Today, the city suffers from overwhelming pollution, housing shortages, traffic jams and, for the first time, outright poverty. An economic downturn fuelled by the military drawdown and diminishing U.S. aid is providing the insurgency with even broader public resentment, particularly among young people.

Much has been achieved, at least in development efforts, since 2002. But the improvements are hardly commensurate to the billions of dollars spent, $100 billion in development aid by the U.S. alone. More than seven million children are back in school, at least one-third of them girls. However, another three million are still not being educated. Theoretically, basic health care is now available within one hour of travel in all provinces, but over two-thirds is private. Most Afghans cannot afford to visit a doctor except *in extremis* and certainly not for preventive care.

While infrastructure improvement has been hampered in active war zones, notably in rural Helmand and Kandahar provinces, significant change has been achieved elsewhere. Numerous roads have been graded or asphalted, electricity installed in many villages, and agriculture has improved, particularly in the eastern provinces along the Pakistan border. Much of this headway, however, was not instigated by donor aid but rather individual Afghan investment. NATO's military approaches, particularly in hard-line insurgent areas, have been criticized for not allowing recovery initiatives to reach parts held or otherwise influenced by the Taliban. At the same, some insurgent commanders have pointedly refused to allow any aid project that might show international aid workers in a positive light.

So, what next? One idea aimed at promoting a long-term solution is to recognize Taliban dominance in select areas, but then seek to work with insurgent councils in a bid to win acceptance through targeted recovery. The overall objective, proponents maintain, would be to demonstrate what international support can achieve through peace.

Some players, such as the Dutch army, managed to do just this in Uruzgan province. Elsewhere, some non-governmental organizations have made collaborative arrangements with all sides, including NATO, the Kabul government, the Taliban, and others, in order to provide medical, educational, and agricultural assistance. This has proven a minefield, given that such assistance sometimes threatens the control of local warlords, who have been playing on the side of both the government and the armed opposition. Yet, combined with peace talks, such initiatives may prove the most realistic approach after 2014.

Afghanistan's descent into a new era of chaos following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 is a cautionary tale. Many were surprised by the PDPA government's ability to continue battling the mujahideen for another three years following the Red Army's pullout. But the regime collapsed when Moscow could no longer afford to support it. Precisely the same thing could happen with the Kabul government if international donors decide that Afghanistan is no longer worth the price.