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The Afghan War: Why the US Lost

By Amin Saikal

SYNOPSIS

A number of variables underpin US failure in Afghanistan. But the most salient ones are three that also explain America's Vietnam fiasco and the Soviet Union's Afghanistan debacle. Whatever Washington's reasoning, the Taliban's return to power entails serious implications for the US' and NATO's prestige.

COMMENTARY

AS AMERICA's soul searching continues on top of the widespread analyses and finger pointing about what went wrong with its Afghanistan adventure, a range of factors are worthy of serious investigation.

Three, which also interrelatedly underlined the United States' Vietnam fiasco and the Soviet Union's defeat in Afghanistan, stand out: lack of a credible partner on the ground; failure to win over the hearts and minds of Afghans; and failure to win over American public opinion at home.

Lack of Credible Local Partner

The United States could not secure a legitimate, credible and effective partner on the ground in Afghanistan. Both the Hamid Karzai administration (December 2001-September 2014) and that of his successor, Ashraf Ghani (September 2014-August 2021), proved to be more internally self-centred, divided, corrupt and dysfunctional than Washington's policymakers could discern.

Both were dominated by political and ethnic entrepreneurs. Their primary concerns were how to personalise and ethnicise politics for their self-preservation and enrichment rather than build solid institutionalised governance structures and engage

in processes to unite Afghanistan's mosaic population as a pre-requisite for long-term stability.

They treated the US and its allies as milking cows, with little or no effort made to prepare the nation for the day when Afghanistan would be required to stand on its own two feet. Meanwhile, Washington's remedial action in support of good governance was at best ad hoc and, at worst, out of sync with an in-depth understanding of the complexity of the Afghan society and its neighbourhood.

The former Secretary of State Robert Gates makes this clear in his 2014 memoirs *The Duty*. The same variable thwarted America's Vietnam and the USSR's Afghanistan efforts to avoid humiliating defeats. Neither the US-backed pro-democracy government in Saigon nor the Soviet-supported ruling communist cluster in Kabul managed to attract the degree of popular legitimacy that were needed to act as effective mechanisms of control on the ground for their foreign patrons.

Failure to Win Afghan Hearts and Minds

The US, despite much investment in blood and treasure, ultimately could not successfully market its invasion to the Afghan people. The people's initial enthusiasm about America's toppling of the Taliban regime and dispersion of Al Qaeda from Afghanistan rapidly gave way to disillusionment.

Poor governance, combined with the US and allied inability or unwillingness to deal decisively with the Taliban's growing insurgency and Pakistan's continued support of the militia in cahoots with Al Qaeda and the Haqqani networks, contributed to pervasive insecurity across Afghanistan.

President Barack Obama's shift from his predecessor's counterterrorism policy to that of counterinsurgency, with an emphasis on protecting the major population centres and Afghanising the war as a prelude to pulling out most of the American and allied troops by the close of 2014, left the countryside wide open for the insurgents.

The rural areas were the most fertile arena for the insurgents, enabling them to surround the population centres. When the withdrawal date for all foreign forces under the February 2020 US-Taliban peace agreement neared, the Taliban were able to rapidly capture the urban centres with little resistance in the wake of collapse of the central government and the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF).

The US and its allies had heavily invested in building the ANDSF, but they were ethnically and tribally constituted, and trained in a patchwork fashion by different members of the US-led coalition. Many of the ANDSF troops and commanders could not be loyal to a central government with which they could not identify.

Nor could they effectively act without US air cover and support of the foreign decision-makers who were embedded with them. This is also what occurred in America's Vietnam and the Soviet Union's Afghanistan cases.

Failure to Win Over US Domestic Opinion

The US and its allies could not eventually sustain the support of their own constituencies. As the war dragged on for two decades without any success in sight, the US and allied public lost interest, and critics of the war found increased reasons and opportunities to question the efficacy of the adventure. Two long-standing critics were Joe Biden and his predecessor, Donald Trump.

In 2009, then Vice President Biden sided with the US ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, in opposing Obama's decision to increase American deployment by 30,000 troops, as requested by the US commander on the ground, General Stanley McChrystal. Biden believed that the US was involved in a very costly and unwinnable war and that it was necessary to disentangle America from it sooner rather than later.

Trump profoundly shared Biden's scepticism. During the 2016 presidential campaign, he railed against US military involvement. Despite boosting troop deployment by 4,000 under pressure from his military leaders in the first year of his presidency, he was quick to move towards ramping up dis-engagement, resulting in the infamous peace agreement with the Taliban.

Biden's handling of the withdrawal was atrocious and instrumentally damaging to Afghanistan and the US' and NATO's power, but it had the support of a majority of the American people.

The loss of public support was also a major factor in the US' Vietnam and Soviets' Afghanistan failed adventures, although less so in the case of the Soviets. The Richard Nixon and Mikhail Gorbachev administrations could not endure growing public discontent with the continuation of the wars.

Serious Blow to American Power

In assessing the reasons for the US and allied defeat in Afghanistan, these factors are central to any lessons learned. US policymakers and war planners need to be cognisant of their Afghanistan experiences, along with those that commonly led to their failure in Vietnam and that of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

The return to power of the theocratic Pakistan-backed and Al-Qaeda-allied Taliban is a serious blow not only to Afghanistan, but also to the future of American power and standing vis-a-vis its adversaries, especially China.

Amin Saikal is Visiting Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. He is author of Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival; and co-author of Islam Beyond Borders: The Umma in World Politics.