

The West is getting Afghanistan wrong – again

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 An Afghan man sells the flags of the former Afghan government and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan during the anti-Pakistan protest in Kabul on September 7, 2021 [West Asia News Agency via Reuters]

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The dust has settled on a chaotic United States withdrawal from Afghanistan. It began with faulty predictions of the Afghan government's longevity (at least 18 months, we were told in April), continued under the protective wing of its adversaries, and concluded with a drone strike which killed some of the Afghans, several of them children, whom the US was so keen to evacuate.

Longtime observers of the US and NATO war, with its frequent unmet timelines and repeated insistence that change was just around the corner, should not be surprised. Despite amassing a wealth of data on Afghanistan and making profitable careers for an army of analysts, contractors and assorted "experts", the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), to paraphrase Sun Tzu, failed to understand either its enemy or the nature of its own intervention.

This article attempts to address several of the most salient misconceptions, past and present, while reflecting on what might be expected of the new Taliban-led dispensation.

'Al-Qaeda is coming back'

Two days before the fall of Kabul, UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace declared that Afghanistan was "heading towards civil war", suggesting the history of Afghanistan and the fragmented nature of the Taliban movement meant al-Qaeda would "probably come back". Since then, his views have been echoed by former US ambassador Ryan Crocker, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, and numerous other commentators and politicians.

Such statements are based on an outdated understanding of the situation in Afghanistan and the greater Middle East. After 2001, al-Qaeda found more fertile ground outside Afghanistan, chiefly in places where governance was shattered and local resentments created by US invasions and bombing campaigns (Iraq, Yemen, Libya).

It has been the presence, rather than the absence, of US violence that has created support for the organisation. Meanwhile, more extreme outfits like ISIL (ISIS) have superseded al-Qaeda both in importance and in their ability and willingness to strike on US territory.

By contrast, the Taliban has shown no inclination to take its fighting outside Afghan borders, despite many opportunities to do so, and was tacitly collaborating with US forces against ISIL in Afghanistan. In the present day, no government can guarantee that none of its nationals will ever carry out an attack in another country – could Australia?

But there is every reason to take seriously the Taliban's evident interest in establishing a peaceful order in Afghanistan. The tragic ISIL attack on Kabul airport only underscores the urgency of doing so.

'The Taliban is fragmented'

The claim that the Taliban is fragmented is also a common misconception. Drawing an inaccurate parallel between the divided mujahideen insurgency against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s and the Taliban, this assertion has been made repeatedly over the years, notably during the Obama presidency as an excuse to avoid serious negotiations: if the Taliban leadership has no control over its constituent commanders, who is there to negotiate with?

Such beliefs led to Obama's stop-start policy of negotiations interspersed with head-hunting by drone strikes. The former, often focused on trying to wean away individual commanders and split the insurgency, yielded no political achievements; the latter resulted in no lasting military gains.

In reality, the Taliban has operated for many years as a cohesive insurgent movement with consultative leadership and multiple centres of power. At times there have been internal tensions and even violence between them, but as a whole, the movement has displayed the ability to weather these conflicts and remain intact.

It clearly demonstrated this cohesiveness and internal discipline last year, in adhering to its peace agreement with the US: in accordance with its public pledges, it initiated peace talks with the Afghan government and its attacks on ISAF forces dropped to next to nothing. Quietly, Taliban forces also provided a ring of security to shield ISAF bases from ISIL attacks.

The Taliban's highly coordinated military campaign this summer, meanwhile, contrasted sharply with the failure of the mujahideen to capture the provincial city of Jalalabad in the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, a failure that breathed three more years of life into the then widely unpopular communist government.

That is not to go to the other extreme of claiming that the Taliban is a completely unitary actor. The movement remains decentralised, and compliance of individual commanders with, for example, the Taliban code of conduct in war, has been uneven. Nevertheless, its leadership has demonstrated the capacity to articulate the movement's red lines, develop consensus around policies which do not cross them, and largely enforce it.

'The Taliban triumphed due to foreign support'

Accompanying ISAF and the Afghan government's failures over the years has been a steady narrative drumbeat in search of a scapegoat, most commonly Pakistan, which has been accused of providing support for the Taliban.

Students of the history of counterinsurgency will note nothing unusual here: incumbent governments routinely attempt to deny insurgents any indigenous legitimacy, instead blaming their failures on the clandestine machinations of foreign sponsors. Thus, for the US, the Vietcong were puppets of the USSR and North Vietnam; for the French, the Algerian nationalists were puppets of Egypt and the USSR; for the Soviets, the mujahideen were the puppets of the US and Pakistan.

And indeed, claims of support are accurate so far as they go: not only Pakistan, but a number of regional powers (Iran, China, Russia, several Arab states) have maintained ties with the Taliban over the last decade, even as they have also supported ISAF's mission and the Afghan government in various ways. Weapons and funds, either acquired on the black market or through state support, flowed through some of these channels – although the biggest source of Taliban weapons was likely the Afghan security forces themselves.

However, as explanations for NATO's failure in Afghanistan, analyses blaming foreign forces obscure as much as they reveal. If foreign support was the crucial determinant of victory, then why did the Afghan government, which by any measure received far more external support, continuously lose ground to the Taliban over the last two decades, even before this final, swift collapse?

The reason is that external support is a double-edged sword. While shoring up an insurgent movement or government's military capabilities, it costs it crucial legitimacy as an indigenous force. And in this respect, the Afghan government, with four-fifths of its budget coming from foreign aid, with an army far larger than it ever could sustain, with resentments in its bureaucracy and security forces running deep against the Western advisers and officers who were running the show, proved itself far more dependent on foreign sponsorship than the Taliban.

As for the Taliban, it is impossible to measure the extent of popular support it enjoys as a movement in Afghanistan. In some places, people have welcomed its governance as an improvement on that of Kabul; in others, it remains deeply mistrusted.

But the Taliban narrative, that the dispensation in Kabul was corrupt and beholden to foreign powers, that the war it waged was against an un-Islamic occupation that has long overstayed its welcome, was a narrative that enjoyed widespread resonance.

It appealed to those who recalled tales of the British invasions; those who suffered under the Soviet occupation; those who were persecuted and imprisoned in the aftermath of NATO's victory in 2001; those who lost friends or relatives as "collateral damage" in NATO airstrikes; those who dealt every day with the corruption and injustices of government officials.

For most of the last 20 years, the Taliban has been the only group credibly fighting on behalf of that narrative. Unsurprisingly, it has always had sympathisers to provide shelter and intelligence, and a ready supply of recruits to replace those fallen on the battlefield.

'The US withdrew too soon'

Since the Taliban takeover, US President Joe Biden has faced a crescendo of criticism from Republicans, pro-war sections of the media, the foreign policy establishment and allies like the UK. His administration has been savaged for betraying the sacrifices of US veterans and Afghan allies, for pulling US troops out too soon, for not making its withdrawal “conditions-based”.

Yet what these critics are never able to give a satisfactory answer to is when would have been the right time to withdraw and how those conditions would have been met. The “too-hasty withdrawal” in reality began in 2014, when the vast majority of ISAF forces left Afghanistan, five years after President Barack Obama’s ill-fated “surge”.

The residual force of 10,000-15,000 never had the capacity to reclaim the initiative from the Taliban. Its sole purpose was to support and train an Afghan security force capable of defending on its own. That it has failed to do so in seven years, to say nothing of the previous 13, points to the more fundamental problems suggested above.

As one study of the ISAF mission concluded: “The real analytical problem is to explain why the post-2001 effort persisted along a path which was obviously leading to a dependent Afghan state ... One hypothesis ... [is] that what the mission to Afghanistan after 2001 was meant to achieve was exactly what it achieved ... Unfortunately, the politics and diplomacy of Western powers in Afghanistan had changed quite radically by 2012; at that point what was needed was a client state able to stand on its own feet, and little time was available to even conceive a strategy to achieve that.”

Biden is quite correct in his assertion that delaying the decision to withdraw would have achieved nothing, and deserves some credit for resisting his commanders’ invariable demands for more troops and more time.

He deserves criticism for not managing the withdrawal in a less chaotic manner, but the most likely route to achieving that would have been to admit the US had been defeated and arrange a transfer of power to a Taliban-led set-up beforehand. Needless to say, few of his critics were ready to come to terms with that reality.

What the future holds

NATO’s war in Afghanistan, which by one estimate resulted in the deaths of 243,000 – most of them Afghans – has finally come to an end. The Taliban is victorious, but what kind of victor it will be remains to be seen.

There are some promising signs: the relatively bloodless culmination of the Taliban's offensive, where many cities surrendered as a result of deals negotiated with local security forces or elders; the talks with former adversaries in Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah; the absence of systematic revenge killings – although there have been isolated accounts of executions and the monitoring of US-allied Afghans. It is also unclear what the situation is in Panjshir, which has resisted the Taliban takeover.

Ethnically, the Taliban has diversified from the exclusively Pashtun movement it was in the 1990s. As early as 2009, the Peshawar shura of the Taliban established a front dedicated exclusively to non-Pashtuns; Tajiks, Turkmens, Uzbeks and some Hazaras have joined the ranks of the Taliban in recent years. It was partly by expanding its presence in the multiethnic north that the Taliban was able to withstand Obama's surge against its southern heartlands; a fact that was once again underlined by the swift capitulation of northern cities in the recent offensive.

In recent years, Shia Hazara communities have also sought and received the protection of the Taliban against ISIL. And after the takeover, the Shia in Kabul were able to carry out Muharram processions in peace.

Nevertheless, like any ruling dispensation in Afghanistan, the Taliban remains Sunni and Pashtun-dominated, and its just-announced interim government gives every impression of being a government of the victors. True, these victors have been arguably more generous and more willing to speak to their defeated opponents than the US was in 2001.

Nevertheless, they will need to reflect that until they provide them, and Afghanistan's minority communities in general, a stake in governance, they will struggle to command broad legitimacy either locally or internationally.

Finally, the status of women under a Taliban-dominated regime has rightly raised concerns. The Taliban has made positive, though vague noises, supporting the right of women to work and be educated through university level, within an "Islamic framework". What that means has yet to be spelled out, and it is possible to imagine more or less concerning scenarios.

Frustration at the unwillingness of Taliban officials to give a clear answer resulted in women's marches on the streets of Kabul and Herat, and the Taliban's rough-handed dispersion of these protests is not a reassuring sign.

Any honest analysis of the future of women in Afghanistan, however, has to take cognisance of the following qualifications: first, that what are frequently described as "the gains of the last 20 years" were often gains limited to a minority of women and girls from among the minority of Afghans who are urbanised, whereas the losses imposed on Afghan women by a relentless and brutal war – in deaths, injuries, trauma, insecurity, economic loss – were more broadly shared.

Second, that Western powers prominently used the cause of women's rights as a justification for continuing war, and by so associating and tarnishing women's rights with the occupation, ensured they would become unnecessarily controversial and vulnerable once the mood of society turned against that occupation.

And third, that regressive attitudes to women in Afghanistan neither originated with nor are limited to the Taliban; in many places, they simply reflect the cultural norm, and the work of changing that norm is a much more challenging and arduous process that can only occur over time within Afghan society.

In its rhetoric, the Taliban is undoubtedly a movement transformed from its suspicious and insular antecedents. It seeks international legitimacy and at least some of its leadership recognise that the kind of rule it tried to impose in the 1990s is, and always was, unsustainable in Afghanistan.

Still, as noted earlier, the Taliban is not a unitary actor, and the pressures of governance will test its cohesion in ways that the war never did. The best the international community can do at this stage is to recognise that it is the dominant power in Afghanistan, to assist its leadership in stabilising the economy and accessing the frozen assets of the Afghan state, and while doing so, push it to honour its public commitments of establishing an inclusive government and guaranteeing the rights of women and minorities.

Those who advocate sanctions or more aggressive intervention are deluded in thinking that such an approach will somehow help Afghans. In reality, they will only satisfy their own sense of wounded pride. The record of the last 40 years of intervention in Afghanistan bears tragic witness to that.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.

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