

THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN: WHAT SHOULD AMERICA'S POLICY BE?

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An Apache helicopter circles American troops in Afghanistan in 2005.

UNDER TWO DIFFERENT COMMANDERS-IN-CHIEF, THE UNITED STATES HAS BEEN AT WAR IN AFGHANISTAN FOR THE PAST 13 YEARS, MAKING IT THE LONGEST WAR IN U.S. HISTORY. PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA ANNOUNCED THIS YEAR THAT U.S. FORCES WILL WITHDRAW FROM THAT COUNTRY BY THE END OF 2016. IN THE WAKE OF THE PRESIDENT'S ANNOUNCEMENT, AMERICANS ARE DEBATING THE PROPER COURSE OF ACTION GOING FORWARD AND TRYING TO DRAW LESSONS FROM THE WAR.

A country roughly the size of Texas, Afghanistan is located in Central Asia. This landlocked nation shares a border with Iran (to the west), Pakistan (to the southeast), China (to the far northeast), and the former Soviet states of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan (to the north). Largely mountainous and dry, Afghanistan can experience freezing winters and intensely hot summers, depending on the location. Its land holds a great variety of natural resources: fuels like coal and natural gas, metals like copper and lithium, and rare earth elements used in the production of many modern-day technologies.

The people of Afghanistan, known as Afghans, comprise a number of ethnic groups. The largest group is the Pashtuns, who also live in northwestern Pakistan. The second largest is the Tajiks, who also live in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Other groups include Hazara, Uzbeks, Aimaks, Turkmen, and

Baloch, each with their own ancestry and culture. None of these groups is exclusive to Afghanistan. In fact, significant populations of all of them live in neighboring countries as well.

In many cases, ethnic groups speak their own languages. The two official languages of Afghanistan are Pashto, the language of the Pashtuns, and Dari, a dialect of Persian. Most communication between ethnic groups is done in Dari, as many Afghans speak two or more languages.

Nearly all Afghans are Muslim. About 90 percent of them follow Sunni Islam, as do most other Muslims in the world. The remaining minority adheres to Shia Islam (which is also the state religion of Iran). Afghanistan's laws and government, the Islamic Republic, are informed by the teachings of the Quran, the holy book of Islam.

Economically, Afghanistan is one of the world's poorest and least developed countries. For each Afghan,

Afghanistan's annual economic production is just over \$1,000, about 2 percent of U.S. output. Agriculture remains the principal contributor to the national economy, with food items like pomegranates and apricots enjoying special prominence while the country works slowly to restore its once-great production of grapes.

For the most part, Afghanistan's considerable natural resources remain untapped, since Afghanistan has lacked the roads, railways, and other infrastructure necessary to drive significant mineral exports. Still, Afghanistan's mining industry may hold promise for the future: The nation's total deposits of extractable metals are estimated to be worth around \$1 trillion. It remains to be seen whether such vast wealth will benefit Afghanistan as a nation or drive armed conflict among warring Afghan tribes.

The official Afghan economy is often overshadowed by the black market, especially for drugs like opium, of which Afghanistan is the world's greatest producer. Opium and hashish provide significant sources of income for Afghan farmers, who grow them for the illegal drug trade. The national government bans the production and sale of drugs, but anti-government forces participate enthusiastically. In other words, the government prevents many poor Afghan farmers from growing and selling certain crops (sometimes even burning fields of opium poppies), while terrorists and insurgent fighters pay good money for the same crops.

Corruption

Conquest and Resistance

Over the centuries, the people of Afghanistan have encountered many armies of foreign powers. The nation is situated along a historic trade route linking Iran to China and the Indian subcontinent. As a result, Afghanistan is of vital strategic importance, not only to East Asian and Middle Eastern nations, but also to various imperial powers attempting to establish influence in the region. In antiquity,

Afghanistan fell to the Macedonian Empire under Alexander the Great, the Mauryan Empire of India, and the Parthian Empire of ancient Persia.

Islam was introduced to Afghanistan in the seventh century by Muslim Arabs, who conquered much of Afghanistan, but were ultimately expelled by native Afghans in 683. Later, in the ninth century, an empire of Persian Muslims called the Saffarids brought Afghanistan under Islamic rule. During this time, however, the country remained religiously pluralistic, with large populations of Hindus and Buddhists as well as some Jews and Zoroastrians. Most of these were converted to Islam in the 10th century by the Ghaznavids, new rulers of Turkic and Persian ancestry. In the years to come, Islam would prove to be a unifying force in an otherwise diverse and fragmented nation, but Afghanistan would remain a hotly contested imperial battleground.

European Entanglements

It was not until the 18th century that Afghanistan drove out all foreign occupiers and established its own government under Mir Wais Hotak, a Pashtun who led an Afghan revolt against the reigning Persians. When Persians sent an army to take back their imperial possession, Hotak's forces persevered and routed the invaders. Under Hotak's brief reign, Afghanistan governed its own affairs. To this day, Afghans celebrate Hotak as a national hero, for his stand against foreign occupiers and his rule over an independent Afghanistan.

Independence, however, did not mean peace. Afghanistan established an empire of its own, fighting for territory against Persian and Indian forces. In the 19th century, Afghanistan found itself caught in the middle of the "Great Game," a contest for imperial supremacy between the British and Russian empires. Britain sought to expand its rule from India, using Afghanistan as a bulwark in Central Asia against the Russians. The British fought three wars to gain control of Afghanistan, winning the second and securing an agreement with the Russians that Afghanistan fell within



Britain's sphere of influence. Following the third war, Afghanistan gained its independence in 1919.

Cold War Involvement

A military coup brought communism to Afghanistan in 1978. For the previous five years, the nation had been ruled by Mohammad Daud Khan, who had seized power and implemented an ambitious program for modernizing Afghanistan's economy and military. But his policies had failed to deliver any material results for Afghans.

The Soviet Union, which bordered Afghanistan, supported the new communist regime, while the U.S. and its allies sought to undermine Afghanistan's government as part of the Cold War. Amid renewed chaos within Afghanistan, the Soviets dispatched troops in 1979 to keep the communists in power. Simultaneously, the U.S., Pakistan, and others armed and supported anti-Soviet forces called the *mujahideen*, Islamic fighters. Ten years later, these fighters had succeeded in expelling Soviet military forces, but the Soviet Union continued to support the communist government financially.

The Rise of the Taliban

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Afghanistan established a post-Communist Islamic state. But a civil war erupted between militias representing various ethnic groups, and foreign powers supported different militias. The Taliban was one of

the *mujahideen* groups vying for control of Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal and collapse. Pashtun by ethnicity, the Taliban was financed early on by Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the main intelligence agency of the Pakistan government. Although the Sunni Taliban was opposed by Shi'ite Iran (who funded rival groups), it was supported by fellow Sunnis in the Saudi Arabian government. In a violent and chaotic nation, the highly religious and well-organized Taliban fighters appeared to represent order and stability. Unfortunately, their ultimate victory established a violent and repressive regime based on a radical reading of the Islamic legal system called *Sharia*.

Sharia prescribes correct governance in politics, economics, and even personal conduct. Following their own interpretation of *Sharia*, the Taliban introduced laws restricting dress, grooming, and speech, prohibited the education and employment of women in most circumstances, and persecuted ethnic and religious minorities. After a rise to power that included numerous massacres and ethnic cleansing campaigns, the Taliban's reign in Afghanistan was marred by widespread sex trafficking of girls and women, public beatings and stoning, and the assassination of international aid workers.

The U.S. War on Terror

On September 11, 2001, terrorists flew commercial passenger jets into

the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., killing nearly 3,000 people. These attacks were orchestrated by al-Qaeda, a terrorist group led by a Saudi national named Osama bin Laden. Basing his operations in Afghanistan, bin Laden planned al-Qaeda attacks and trained al-Qaeda terrorists. The Taliban, which bin Laden had praised as an exemplary Islamic state, refused to extradite him, both before and after the attacks of September 11.

The United States was shocked by the scale and lethality of the attacks, which were unprecedented in American history. People in the U.S. rallied behind President George W. Bush, who issued the following policy in the aftermath of 9/11: The United States will "make no distinction between terrorists and the nations that harbor them," and will "hold both to account." Given this principle, the Taliban's refusal to extradite bin Laden implicated it in an act of war against the United States.

In response, the U.S. and its allies invaded Afghanistan in October 2001, with the overwhelming support of the American people. The invasion had three goals. Its first and primary goal was to destroy the al-Qaeda network and bring to justice the perpetrators of the 9/11 attack. The second goal was to depose the Taliban in order to deny terrorist groups safe haven in Afghanistan. And the final goal was to provide the security and humanitarian assistance necessary to enable Afghans to govern themselves.

Nearly 13 years later, the U.S. has accomplished many of its objectives: The Taliban has been deposed, al-Qaeda has been reduced to a shell of its former self, and Osama bin Laden is dead, killed in a 2011 special operations raid in Pakistan. Moreover, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) alone has spent more than \$13 billion providing food, water, and medicine to Afghans as well as building critical infrastructure and supporting Afghan education.

Although this is a considerable expense, it falls far short of at least one historical precedent: the (inflation-adjusted) \$160 billion spent by the U.S. after World War II to rebuild Europe under the Marshall Plan.

Women in particular have made significant gains over the past 13 years. The Taliban had outlawed even the home-schooling of females. Nearly 40 percent of today's Afghan students are girls and women. The Taliban had barred women from working in most jobs and from participating in politics. Today, Afghan women work in a number of different occupations, including police, military, and political office.

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In addition to proclaiming the political equality of men and women, the current Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan recognizes a citizen's right to free speech and expression and provides for religious minorities' free exercise of religion. The Constitution provides for the peaceful settling of political differences between regional and ethnic groups. A federal government presides over a number of smaller provinces headed by local governors. Similar to the U.S., Afghanistan now has a bicameral legislative branch, a judicial branch led by a supreme court, and an executive branch headed by the president. Each of these has its own set of powers and prerogatives.

Despite this progress, the situation in Afghanistan remains complicated, troubled, and brittle. The nation's current government, led by President Hamid Karzai, was ranked in a 2013 report by Transparency International as one of the world's most corrupt (along with North Korea and Somalia). Afghanistan's lack of a cohesive

civic culture threatens to make the promise of its Constitution a dead letter. Meanwhile, Taliban insurgents are fighting the government to reclaim power for themselves. The Taliban has an unofficial safe haven in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, a loosely governed Pashtun area that borders Afghanistan. The insurgents may even have foreign assistance from their original patrons in Pakistan's ISI, although American and Pakistani government officials deny such assistance. Nevertheless, President Barack Obama has committed the U.S. to ending combat operations this year, with a full withdrawal of U.S. forces taking place in 2016.

The Debate Over Withdrawal

Opponents of the planned U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan argue that progress in Afghanistan is fragile and that the country may unravel without a continued U.S. military presence. Afghanistan and its military remain fractured along ethnic lines, and the central government lacks full control over large swaths of the country. Worse, the Afghan state and military employ a number of covert Taliban loyalists and foreign actors. The phenomenon of "green-on-blue" violence incidents, in which Afghan soldiers attack allied Western forces, underlines the gravity of the problem.

The result of such an unraveling would be profound for national security interests. The Taliban could regain power and once again provide a safe base of operations for extremist Islamic terrorists. If that were to occur, the U.S. occupation would have failed to accomplish its long-term objectives. These events would not be without precedent. The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq was followed by an increase in sectarian violence, a civil war, and the rise of ISIS, a ruthless terrorist group seeking to establish its brutal rule over Iraq and neighboring Syria.

As in Iraq, the past 13 years of Afghanistan's humanitarian progress may hang in the balance. Like Iraq,

Afghanistan's deeply divided society lacks the continuous tradition of the rule of law and individual rights, which underpins American democracy. It remains to be seen whether its current, republican form of government can be sustained without Western military occupation. If the Taliban or some other group should seize control of the Afghan state, the U.S. should expect the end of Afghan democracy, the return of bans on women in school and the workplace, the renewed persecution of ethnic and religious minorities, and violent reprisals directed against anyone who cooperated with the U.S.

The proponents of U.S. withdrawal make several arguments in favor of ending the war in Afghanistan. First, American military capacity has limits. A continued, robust commitment to Afghanistan compromises the United States' ability to act elsewhere. With so many of its soldiers and military assets dedicated indefinitely to one country, the U.S. loses some of its ability to project power or make credible threats in pursuing other interests in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, or Asia.

Furthermore, advocates of withdrawal argue that the United States has discharged any moral duties it assumed in invading Afghanistan. More than 2,000 U.S. soldiers have lost their lives in Afghanistan, with a great many more injured or disabled. In addition, the U.S. has spent more than \$500 billion in Afghanistan, fighting Taliban forces, providing security, and administering humanitarian aid. After more than a decade of U.S. sacrifice, this argument suggests, it is time for Afghanistan to take responsibility for its own security and government.

Finally, to say that the U.S. should stay in order to accomplish certain goals is to assume that those goals can be achieved. Advocates of withdrawal say that there is little rational basis for such a belief. Afghanistan's sectarian tensions are ancient, may be intractable, and may undermine any prospect of long-term stability for a democratic government.

What's more, the U.S. military has carried a heavy burden of the long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Compared to past wars, a tiny fraction of the American people served in these wars, resulting in many soldiers returning to war in multiple tours of duty. At home, the recent scandal in the Department of Veterans Affairs exposed the great difficulty in providing adequate medical care to those who served in these wars and suffered profound physical and psychological harm. In this context, withdrawal may be an opportunity for the U.S. military to regroup and recover.

DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What do you think is Afghanistan's greatest strength as a nation? Greatest weakness? Explain.
2. Was the U.S. right to equate al-Qaeda ("terrorists") with the Taliban ("those who harbor them")? Explain your answer and examine the consequences for the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.
3. What obligations, if any, does the U.S. have to Afghanistan, whose government was overthrown? If the U.S. has obligations, have they been met? Explain your answers.

ACTIVITY

What Should Be the U.S. Role in Afghanistan?

In this activity, students will role play advisers to a U.S. senator on the Foreign Relations Committee. The advisers will advise the senator on a policy option for Afghanistan.

Divide the class into small groups. Each group should:

1. Discuss the policy options, below.
2. Decide on a policy it favors. If the group cannot agree, students can present dissenting positions.
3. Be prepared to present its option to the class and to argue its position, citing evidence from the article to support its position.

Regroup the class and call on groups to argue for their chosen policy. Conclude by holding a class vote on which policy to follow.

Policy Options

1. Leave Afghanistan altogether, as soon as possible.
2. President Obama's proposal: Gradually withdraw troops by 2016, when just a small force remains to defend the American embassy.
3. Remain indefinitely in Afghanistan, staying the course until the Taliban has been defeated and a stable government rules the country.
4. Create your own option.

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