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Security
Assistance
Monitor

**EVER-
SHIFTING
GOALPOSTS:**

LESSONS FROM 20 YEARS
OF SECURITY ASSISTANCE IN
AFGHANISTAN



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The Center for International Policy (CIP) is an independent nonprofit center for research, public education, and advocacy on U.S. foreign policy. CIP works to make a peaceful, just, and sustainable world the central pursuit of U.S. foreign policy. CIP was founded in 1975 in the wake of the Vietnam War by former diplomats and peace activists who sought to reorient U.S. foreign policy to advance international cooperation as the primary vehicle for solving global challenges and promoting human rights. Today, we bring diverse voices to bear on key foreign policy decisions and make the evidence-based case for why and how the United States must redefine the concept of national security in the 21st century.

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The Security Assistance Monitor (SAM), a program of CIP, tracks and analyzes U.S. security and defense assistance programs worldwide. By informing policymakers, media, scholars, NGOs, and the public (in the United States and abroad) about trends and issues related to U.S. foreign security assistance, we seek to enhance transparency and promote greater oversight of U.S. military and police aid, arms sales, and training.

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Cover photo is of Afghan Special Security Forces and U.S. Special Operations soldiers in Mohammad Agha district. July 28, 2018. U.S. Air Force/DVIDS



Afghan Special Security Force operator rehearsing for a mission in Paktika province. Dec. 10, 2017. U.S. Air Force/Staff Sgt. Doug Ellis/DVIDS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After 20 years in Afghanistan, there are an infinite number of ways to tell the story of how the United States and international partners failed to create effective, independent security forces capable of taking control from the Taliban and securing the country. But there is one thing we know for certain that is central to international armed conflict. Any full withdrawal demands a plan, a long-term strategy to ensure a true exit, which includes knowing how a country can provide for its own security.

According to the U.S. military's own doctrine, security cooperation should be integrated into operational plans in all phases of action—not as an afterthought.¹ In other words, throughout combat operations in Afghanistan, the U.S. and international partners should have prioritized what was needed for a military exit: positioning Afghan security forces to take over when the United States and international partners leave.

Why then, despite a massive infusion of resources, two decades of effort and sacrifice, and strategic and military leadership from the United States and NATO partners, has the goal of building up capable security forces remained so elusive? Of course, the lack of a political solution makes stability difficult. But even so, why couldn't the United States and NATO partners, with the billions of dollars available, support the formation of independent, capable Afghan security forces that would allow international troops to depart?

While there are many answers this report will explore, the answer the authors found at the root of these questions, that ties them all together, is the inherent tension between multiple overriding goals in Afghanistan—in particular, the short-term political and tactical exigencies

1. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3-20, Security Cooperation, May 23, 2017, p. III-1, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_20_20172305.pdf.

that come with operating in a conflict zone—and the long-term goal of creating independent security forces. Shorter-term goals, including the warfighting effort, and other military and political priorities, would win out over long-term security assistance again and again.

Pressures were unrelenting in Afghanistan—pressures from a resurgent Taliban, pressures to show quick military progress from successive U.S. administrations, the pressures of an American public understandably tired of war, and the pressures to reinvent security strategies and tactics with each new administration. And each time the goalpost moved, strategies shifted, were thrown out, or were overtaken by urgent events, and the long-term goal of building up capable security forces was deprioritized for another day.

There are three primary ways this played out, laid out in this report through three categories of findings. The first set of findings demonstrates that rather than a thoughtful, strategic approach to planning for security assistance that would allow it to depart, the United States set ambitious goals that ultimately fostered long-term dependencies. It did so by drawing on massive resources to a degree that was not suitable or sustainable for Afghanistan, which ironically engendered the need for even more resources. This paradox was compounded by a patchwork of security assistance structures that failed to operate cohesively, leaving no single entity within the U.S. government fully responsible for the result.

The second set of findings examines the execution of security assistance efforts, and in particular, the conflict between shorter-term warfighting and political goals, over the longer-term effort of building up security forces that could take over when the U.S. leaves. Conflicting visions, political goals, and incompatible security assistance approaches among American, Afghan, and coalition governments further compounded these issues.

The third set of findings explores a host of historical, cultural, and environmental legacies that would pose challenges to establishing security in Afghanistan. These include not only Afghanistan's context, but also that of the United States and the raw emotion in the wake of the 9/11 attacks that created pressure for quick action over diligent planning. Instead of shaping security assistance to adapt to those dynamics, the U.S. and NATO partners instead forged ahead, seeking more immediate tactical and political goals over deliberate planning for security assistance. The consequences of this approach would reverberate throughout the course of U.S. involvement.

In short, the effort to strengthen Afghan security forces suffered from a failure to design and plan sustainably, an execution that was forever subject to shifting strategies and a lack of overall ownership of the results, and a lack of attention to political and cultural contexts. As a result, security assistance in Afghanistan was never an end to itself, but constantly in service to a host of rapidly changing priorities.

That is not to say that correcting the U.S. approach to security assistance would necessarily have resulted in a secure, peaceful, Afghanistan. The Taliban have deep ties throughout the country as well as international support, and supporting a stable post-Taliban Afghanistan would have been a great challenge even with the best-planned security assistance. But the missteps outlined in this report made that effort virtually impossible.

In light of President Biden's announcement of a U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan by September 11 of this year, this report offers several lessons learned, including committing to a longer-term vision for security assistance in future endeavors. This is a conversation and goal that U.S. and international planners should have prioritized from the very first days in Afghanistan. There is no way to turn back the clock to reverse the mistakes of the last 20 years, but if some lessons can be gained from these efforts and the sacrifices that have been made, then future similar efforts, if they must be made at all, will at least have a better roadmap for what may lie ahead.

Lessons Learned

- SSA partnerships should be founded on a shared, responsive, but enduring long-term vision.
- SSA must be designed to fit local context and with local stakeholders at the decision-making table.
- The various agencies within the U.S. government must develop a shared understanding of what SSA is meant to achieve.
- The U.S. should not provide assistance at any scale that it isn't able to account for or responsibly oversee.
- Over-resourcing in SSA can create its own resource deficits.
- SSA assessments must consider risks posed by local corruption, governance, and conflict.
- Direct U.S. participation in hostilities creates new sets of conditions, imperatives, and interests that are frequently incompatible with SSA objectives.
- The division of responsibility for security sector assistance across the U.S. government creates a vacuum of leadership in the SSA enterprise.
- SSA efforts need a more robust, broadly conceived, and interdisciplinary assessment, monitoring, and evaluation (AM&E) regime.
- The SSA enterprise would benefit from a robust mechanism that encourages dissent and policy recalibration within the Departments of Defense and State.

INTRODUCTION

The war in Afghanistan is now America's longest and continues to frustrate U.S. and Afghan defense planners. President Biden announced on April 14 that he would withdraw the remaining troops from Afghanistan by September 11, the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. But despite the announcement, violence across the country remains high. Biden is the fourth U.S. president to struggle politically, diplomatically, and militarily to create the conditions to allow for a successful U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Nearly 20 years after the conflict began, the Taliban carries out regular attacks, and Al Qaeda leaders have maintained their allegiance to the Taliban. And still, Afghan security forces lack the capacity and independence to take back the country and provide security for Afghans. On paper, Afghan security forces number more than 300,000,² although the actual number is almost certainly lower, as the presence of absent or deceased personnel who continue to receive salaries, is widespread.



Displaced Afghan children living in a crowded refugee camp in Kabul. Feb. 10, 2009. Paula Bronstein/Getty Images

The cost of the conflict has been staggering, with more than 2,442 U.S. military deaths, 3,846 U.S. contractor deaths, more than 66,000 Afghan military and police deaths, more than 47,000 Afghan civilian deaths, and more than \$2 trillion in direct U.S. taxpayer costs.³ Unsurprisingly, the desire to close this chapter in American history has become a rare point of agreement across the political spectrum, but so are concerns over a post-withdrawal Afghanistan and the violence likely to follow.

The Security Assistance Monitor (SAM) at the Center for International Policy (CIP) undertook this report because as a data-driven program and repository of the only comprehensive

2. Office of the Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year 2021, "Justification for FY 2021 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) Afghanistan Security Forces Fund," https://securityassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/fy2021_ASFF_Justification_Book-copy.pdf.

3. Brown University, Costs of War, "Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars," November 2019, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsof-war/files/cow/imce/figures/2021/Human%20and%20Budgetary%20Costs%20of%20Afghan%20War%2C%202001-2021.pdf>.

databases of U.S. security assistance around the world, it is uniquely positioned to analyze and report on the single largest and most ambitious U.S. security assistance enterprise ever attempted. U.S. security assistance in Afghanistan has cost over \$90 billion in direct support to the Afghan defense and security establishment.⁴

The report's authors drew heavily on SAM's databases for the figures and analysis in this report. These databases use official Defense and State Department documents on security assistance, arms sales, and foreign military training.

In addition, the authors engaged in a literature review of security assistance doctrine and the 20-year effort in Afghanistan and interviewed a range of Afghan, American, and international experts, diplomats, and security personnel, including the office of the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP), the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA), the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit in Kabul, Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), Afghanistan-based staff for the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), and others with direct experience with security assistance in Afghanistan.

The report's research examines the question of why, despite the unprecedented scale of America's security sector assistance (SSA) effort, the Afghan Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) continue to be plagued by severe strategic and operational shortcomings, with widely held reservations about their ability to endure an international drawdown. Though the rapid development of the ANDSF has been an extraordinary undertaking, the disparity between the ambitions and realities of the Afghan security sector has fed a broader desire by policymakers, experts, and researchers to understand the lessons learned from this enterprise.

“DEVELOPING ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS FROM THE SSA EFFORT IN AFGHANISTAN IS OF URGENT AND LONG-TERM VALUE.”

Developing actionable insights from the SSA effort in Afghanistan is of urgent and long-term value. The Biden administration, the Afghan government, and the international community are struggling to develop plans for enduring security partnerships (or lack thereof) amidst escalating levels of violence, and an insurgency whose principal demand is the immediate departure of foreign troops. The ability of the Afghan government to hold its own against Taliban and other non-state armed groups remains an essential point of leverage in intra-Afghan talks and post-peace plans for security development efforts.

4. Security Assistance Monitor. “Security Aid Pivot Table.” Washington, DC 2021, <https://securityassistance.org/security-sector-assistance/>.



A coalition Joint Terminal Attack Controller training Afghan Territorial Force members in Kandahar province. Jul. 10, 2018. NATO photo/DVIDS

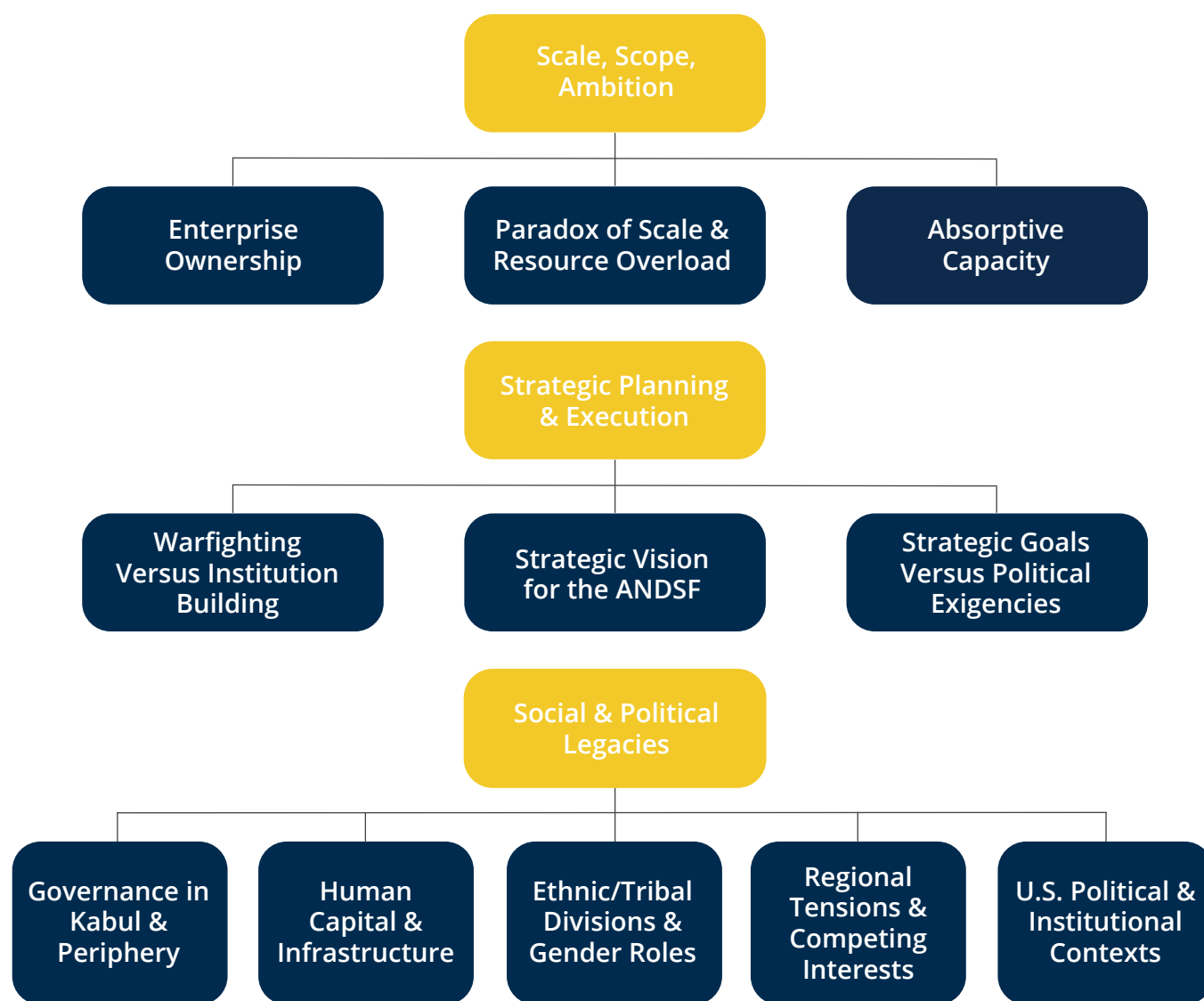
Over the long term, the U.S. experience in Afghanistan should inform not only best practices in future large-scale SSA efforts, but the very calculus behind whether to pursue SSA at such enormous scales and in such challenging contexts. Such lessons are especially important in the current international context, as SSA continues to play a central role in U.S. global engagement and stands to become even more of a fixture as the U.S. seeks to supplant its diminishing physical presence across the globe.

There have been notable efforts to draw practical lessons from the U.S. experience in building an Afghan defense establishment, particularly from SIGAR, as well as other formidable research institutions, including USIP, CNA, and the RAND Corporation. Nevertheless, the lessons learned have so far remained scattered across various stovepipes of knowledge, experience, and reporting aims.

The findings that follow aim to collect, analyze, and in short order, present lessons learned from the U.S. security assistance enterprise in Afghanistan, supported by robust analysis from SAM's own databases, and with lessons learned for policymakers and experts.

This report divides its findings into three categories. They are:

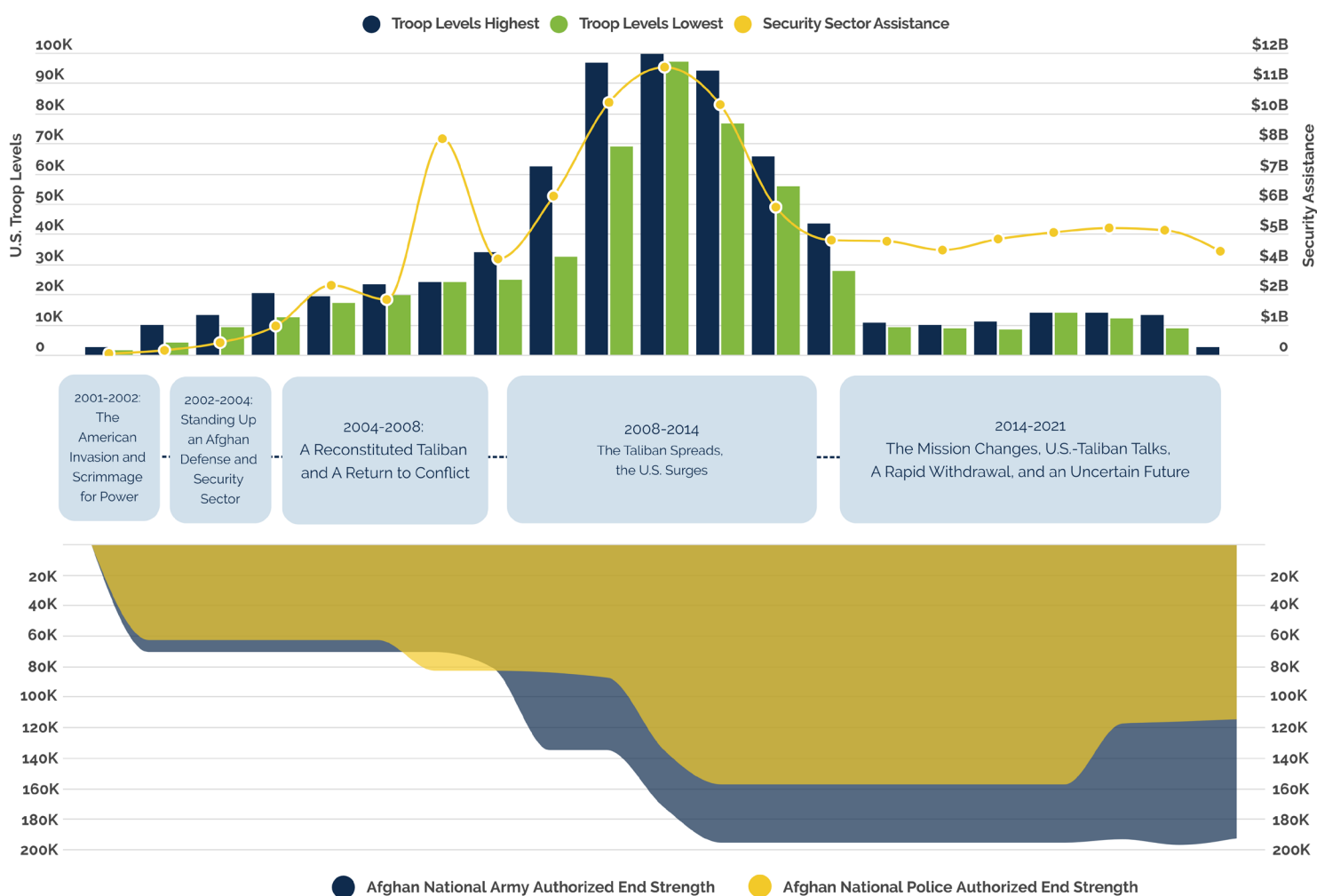
- 1. CHALLENGES OF SCALE, SCOPE, AND AMBITION;**
- 2. STRATEGIC PLANNING AND EXECUTION; AND**
- 3. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL LEGACIES**



Corruption within Afghanistan's security forces and government is another theme that surfaced in nearly every interview, and a failure to prioritize it earlier is a key shortcoming of international security assistance efforts. Because it permeates every aspect of the security assistance effort, this report addresses corruption but does not treat it as a separate finding. Finally, in order to contextualize the full chronology of U.S. and international security assistance efforts, this report also includes a timeline of U.S. security assistance efforts as an appendix.

The findings that follow, grouped according to the above three categories, all speak to the overarching failures by the United States and international partners to prioritize the long-term requirements of building up an effective and capable Afghan security sector, to the detriment of the United States, all those who sought to build up and support Afghanistan's security sector, and most of all, Afghans living in a perpetual state of conflict.

AFGHANISTAN TIMELINE AND SSA LEVELS



FINDINGS

Scale, Scope, and Ambition

The earliest days of security assistance in Afghanistan began as a much smaller undertaking, before ballooning into the most ambitious SSA effort the United States had ever attempted. This increasing scale served to reduce planning abilities and to create a short-sighted approach. The result were objectives that were simply out of reach of the means and abilities of the United States and its partners.

Even many of the more constrained goals were overly ambitious for Afghanistan’s context. Consider, for example, this goal for the Afghan National Police, cited in a report by CSIS: “By end- 2010, a fully constituted, professional, functional, and ethnically balanced Afghan National Police and Afghan Border Police with a combined force of up to 62,000 will be able

to meet the security needs of the country effectively and will be increasingly fiscally sustainable.”⁵ Such ambitious goals—professional, functional, police forces that fully represent the communities they serve—are difficult to achieve and require great attention and resources, even in the United States. That is not to say ambitious goals are undesirable, only that planners could have instead considered what could truly be achieved in the timeframe and with the resources given, and to prioritize the most important of those—rather than providing a wish list of best-case scenarios. In addition, even defining measures for “professional, functional, and ethnically balanced” would prove elusive, resulting in nebulous senses of goals and objectives.

These practical challenges were compounded by cultures and structures within the U.S. military, including a can-do culture, the persistent turnover of personnel, and the defining political belief that pouring in resources, in just a few years of time could achieve optimal results.

It is also critical to note that these grand ambitions in Afghanistan coincided with America's grand ambitions in Iraq. The Iraq invasion, which began during the first years of U.S. and international efforts in Afghanistan, greatly detracted from the abilities of the United States and international community to focus sufficiently on Afghanistan. Journalist Ahmed Rashid writes, “The United States and the international community could not hope to rebuild Afghanistan without more troops, a wider and deeper Western military presence that could offer greater security for the Afghan people against the Taliban and the warlords and allow for reconstruction to start. None of this was possible because the war in Iraq took precedence, and Afghanistan, the home of Al Qaeda and the planning for 9/11, was considered a sideshow by a White House that had gotten its priorities seriously wrong.”⁶

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5. Robert D. Lamb and Kathryn Mixon, “Rethinking Absorptive Capacity: A New Framework, Applied to Afghanistan’s Police Training Program,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2013, ISBN: 978- 1 4422-2505-3, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/130617_Lamb_RethinkingAbsorptiveCap_WEB.pdf citing The London Conference on Afghanistan, “The Afghanistan Compact: Building on Success,” January 31– February 1, 2006, p. 6, https://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/afghanistan_compact.pdf.

6. Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. And The Disaster In Pakistan, Afghanistan, And Central Asia* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2009), ISBN 9780143115571, p. 196, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/530606/descent-into-chaos-by-ahmed-rashid/>.



Then Secretary of State John Kerry with President Hamid Karzai in Kabul. Oct. 12, 2013. US Embassy Kabul Afghanistan/Flickr

But even considering Afghanistan alone, the scale, scope, and ambitions for security assistance often failed to consider what was actually achievable and the staggering resources that would be required to achieve them. At its height, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) included more than 130,000 troops from 51 nations. U.S. forces reached a high point of about 100,000 in 2011.⁷ Along the way, many policymakers and experts warned against overly ambitious objectives in Afghanistan. In 2009, for example, then-Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair John Kerry said the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan reaches “too far, too fast,” although he did not go all the way toward supporting only a narrow counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan, over fears that ceding the country to the Taliban could lead to civil war.

In the end, a striking asymmetry between the expectations of nations providing security assistance, especially the United States, put upon Afghanistan, regardless of its size and abilities, raised expectations for maximalist achievements and laid the groundwork for strategic failures.

Enterprise Ownership

As SIGAR pointedly put the problem, “After 17 years of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and security-related U.S. appropriations totaling \$83.3 billion...there is not one person, agency, country, or military service that has had sole responsibility for overseeing security sector assistance.”⁸ Not only was the task of developing the ANDSF spread among multiple services and agencies within the U.S. government, but advisors typically spend a year or less in Afghanistan, leaving little institutional knowledge behind when they return home. This further

7. Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, “U.S. Relations with Afghanistan: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet,” United States Department of State, January 20, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-afghanistan/>.

8. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Executive Summary” in *Divided Responsibility: Lessons from U.S. Security Sector Assistance in Afghanistan*. (Arlington, Virginia: SIGAR, June 2019), <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessons-learned/SIGAR-19-39-LL.pdf>.

“THE SECURITY ASSISTANCE MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN IS NOT UNITED UNDER ONE SINGLE ENDURING, COMPREHENSIVE PLAN TO GUIDE ITS EFFORTS.”

reduced the ability of any U.S. government personnel to continuously bear responsibility for the ultimate results of SSA.

The security assistance mission in Afghanistan is not united under one single enduring, comprehensive plan to guide its efforts,⁹ and that lack of cohesion in strategy is intimately tied to the lack of cohesion in security assistance structures. Mixed structures of oversight, control, and responsibility for security assistance efforts have led to competing and inconsistent strategies, a lack of consistent oversight, and at times even conflicting goals within the U.S. government, as well as between the United States and international partners.

Within the U.S. government alone, the traditional lines of responsibility between the U.S. Departments of State (DOS) and Defense (DOD) quickly blurred. Because of its size, presence, and vast responsibilities in Afghanistan, the Defense Department often took over many diplomatic and development functions from the Departments of State and USAID.

One key example of how this played out was in the authorities chosen to build up the Afghan National Police (ANP). The State Department is the lead agency by law for foreign police development but struggles to operate in conflict environments. The Department of Defense therefore assumed the role of much of the training, advising, and equipping of the ANP, and unsurprisingly, focused on creating a paramilitary force that could support the Afghan National Army (ANA), rather than fulfilling traditional civilian policing functions.¹⁰ This raises critical questions over the ANP’s ability to transition from that role to one of serving and protecting Afghan civilians in the event of a peace deal and the cessation of military conflict.

International coordination among various overlapping entities is further complicated by the fact that there is not one nation within NATO responsible for all security sector assistance. While the NATO commander provides direction and coordination, other commanders of nations’ military forces may choose to ignore or dismiss the NATO commander’s recommendations.¹¹

9. Ibid.

10. Sopko, John F. “Risks to Sustainable Peace in Afghanistan.” Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, January 28, 2020, p. 10, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/testimony/SIGAR-20-24-TY.pdf>.

11. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Divided Responsibility: Lessons from U.S. Security Sector Assistance Efforts in Afghanistan*, July 2019, <https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/divided-responsibility/index.html>.



Georgian Soldiers training to operate alongside International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. Feb. 23, 2014. The U.S. Army/Flickr

Adding to that, U.S. officials initially were unfamiliar and uncomfortable with NATO processes and authorities, which often did not align with U.S. doctrine.¹² Accordingly, the United States originally had a much more constrained view of the role other international partners would play in Afghanistan. The U.S. later saw the practical and budgetary benefits of internationalizing security assistance, particularly as the war in Iraq began to draw on more of Washington's financial and military resources. Thus, the U.S. transitioned from seeking to minimize the role of ISAF beyond Kabul in 2001, to a 2003 push by the DOD to have NATO lead on all reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. But changing mandates created tensions and confusion among ISAF and NATO partners, particularly as the U.S. sought to detach itself from ISAF structures to allow for independence of action and to minimize state-building obligations that came under the NATO and ISAF purviews. Beyond that, without existing architectures for multilateral SSA at this scale, much of the early SSA decision-making and planning was ad hoc in nature, creating gaps and inconsistencies in the international approach.

Because no single U.S. government agency or entity was responsible for the entire security assistance enterprise from start to finish, there was little "ownership" of security efforts, or investment and attention to their ultimate outcome. Instead, there was a patchwork of agencies and offices providing various capabilities, advising, and training, but no one entity to assess these efforts as a whole, aside from the independent evaluation role of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).

12. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, September 2017, p. 9, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf?mod=article_inline.

SECURITY COOPERATION PLANNING FRAMEWORK: NATIONAL STRATEGIC DIRECTION (POLICY AND STRATEGY)

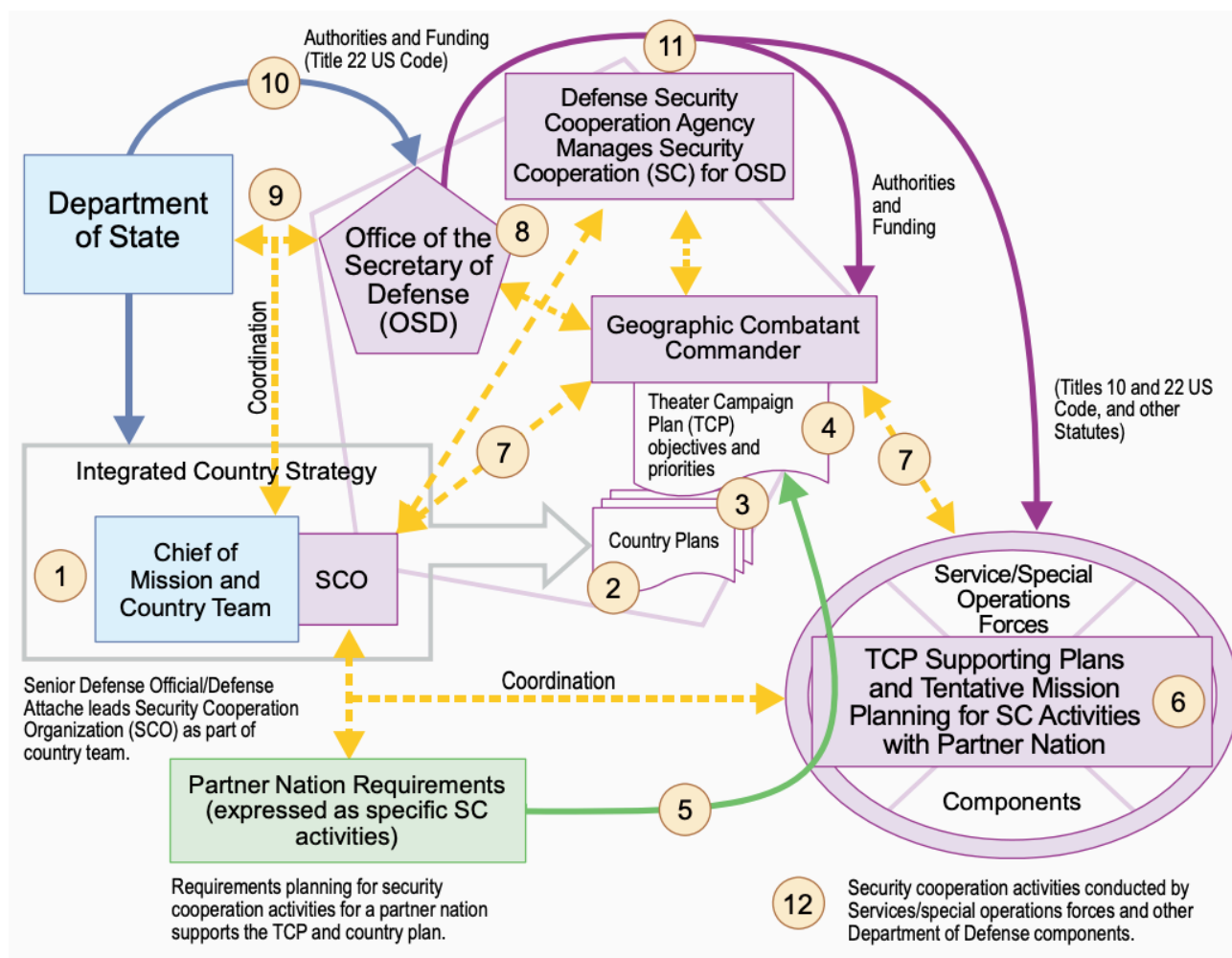


Figure III-1. Security Cooperation Planning Framework, Joint Publication 3-20

Dozens of U.S. government entities and international partners jointly manage security assistance programs, as well as training and deploying advisors and other experts, meaning that results and approaches vary both within and across international partners.¹³ And the same divide that marks different approaches for military and diplomatic personnel is also reflected in varying approaches to ministerial and tactical advising efforts—leading to disjointed efforts to develop the ANDSF, and confusion among trainees.

Deficiencies in training are one result of this lack of enterprise ownership. Ideally, advisors and other security assistance personnel would undergo training based on a shared outlook to forge a common approach to security assistance. In practice, that rarely happened. Personnel without a background in security assistance were often slotted into security assis-

13. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Executive Summary" in *Divided Responsibility: Lessons from U.S. Security Sector Assistance in Afghanistan*. (Arlington, Virginia: SIGAR, June 2019), p.VIII-XVII, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-19-39-LL.pdf>.

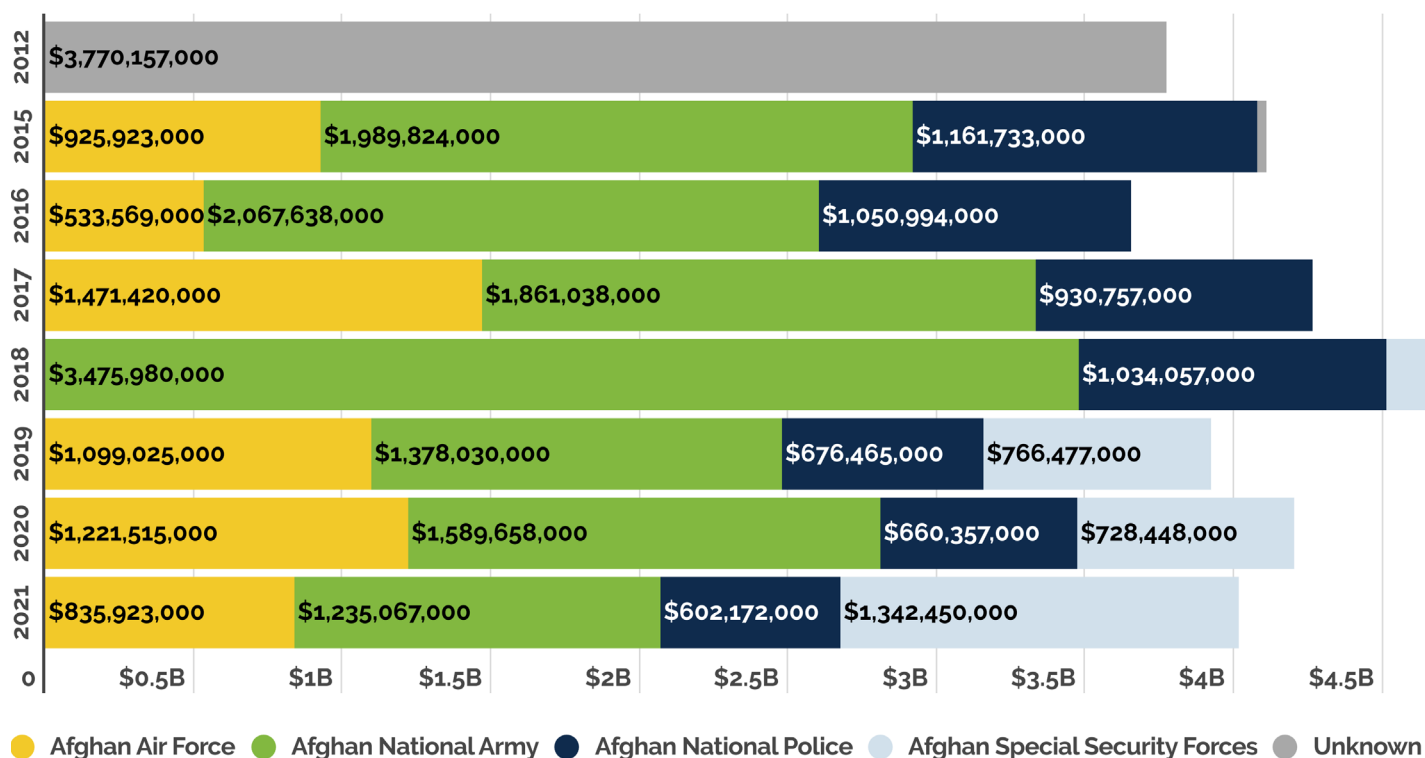
tance positions, in part because of frequently shifting command structures in Afghanistan. And the U.S. military continues to struggle to provide appropriate pre-deployment training, and to retain personnel, the result of which is a deep lack of institutional memory with regard to security assistance in Afghanistan and an overall fractured approach.

Paradox of Scale and Resource Overload

Early U.S. and NATO strategies did not account for what would ultimately become the full scope of international investment in Afghanistan. Indeed, as SIGAR reported, “initial plans for Afghanistan focused solely on U.S. military operations and did not include the development of an Afghan army, police, or supporting ministerial-level institutions.”¹⁴

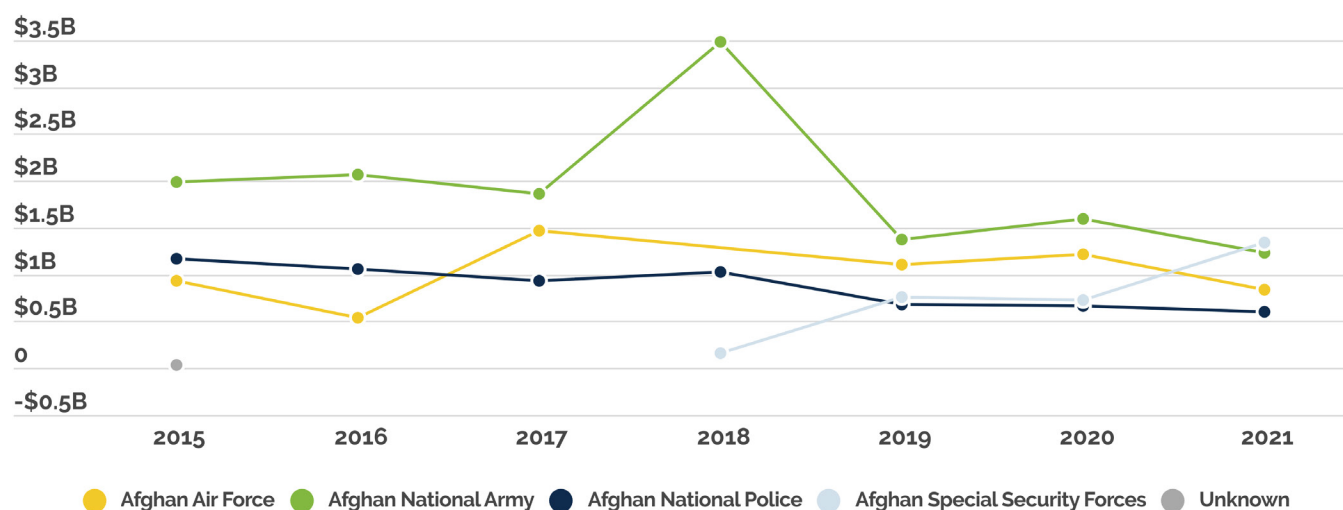
Despite initial reservations to committing the United States to “nation building” in Afghanistan, the SSA effort in the country would ultimately amount to the most ambitious such enterprise in modern American history. The magnitude of the effort is difficult to overstate, amounting to more than \$90 billion since the U.S. invasion. The unfortunate irony of the enterprise was that its sheer scale itself presented unique challenges and strategic pitfalls.

BUDGET GROUP SINCE FY12



14. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Executive Summary” in Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan. (Arlington, Virginia: SIGAR, September 2017), https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf?mod=article_inline.

BUDGET GROUP SINCE FY15



Fundamentally, the scale of the investment in Afghan security forces fueled expanding ambitions that consistently outpaced resourcing. In effect, the unprecedented size of the investment itself inflated expectations that exceeded the ability of the international community to satisfy. Those inflated ambitions meant that the billions being poured into Afghanistan still amounted to funding shortfalls. The funding continued to chase the vision, and as the vision changed, the machinations of government appropriation and funding cycles were slow to react.

Ironically, simply expanding the resources available, even in the context of funding shortfalls, was an imperfect solution. Increasing the levels of investment created new challenges in basic oversight and accountability mechanisms for the Department of Defense that would fuel inefficiencies and waste across the enterprise. Corruption was key to this, including the funding of “ghost troops”—accounts not linked to real personnel, but rather positions on payrolls getting paid, with the money being diverted to corrupt commanders. As a result, the true numbers of security force personnel were always difficult to ascertain.

“FOR THE FIRST DECADE OF THE ASSISTANCE ENTERPRISE, VIRTUALLY NO CONDITIONS WERE PUT ON AMERICAN AID PACKAGES.”

This phenomenon illustrates the inability of the United States to oversee its aid. Perhaps even more troubling was the apparent absence of the U.S. desire to fully account for its assistance. For the first decade of the assistance enterprise, virtually no conditions were put on American aid packages, creating an environment ripe for diversion, corruption, or misuse. It wasn’t until 2013 that the United States began to push for biometric enrollment

to reduce the risk of ghost troops, and threatened to withhold salaries until biometric milestones were achieved.

Logistically and operationally, resourcing for the ANDSF reflected the chaotic and ad hoc nature of the enterprise itself. With little consideration for post-conflict reconstruction, the sudden and urgent need to build up the central government's security institutions after the fall of the Taliban strained the existing mechanisms for SSA funding. Initially, Foreign Military Financing and Foreign Military Sales were the only programmatic tools available to provide Afghan forces with military equipment and services at the scale needed, but they were never intended to surge for wartime requirements.¹⁵

In all, the United States took too long and failed to prioritize funding the ANDSF until 2007, which, because of funding cycles, meant the impact was only felt seven years into the war, in late 2008.¹⁶ Additionally, funding and appropriations cycles were ill-suited to keep up with the rate of strategic change for the ANDSF or events on the ground. Funding cycles create pressure to obligate funds quickly and spend appropriated funds before they expire, regardless of their suitability for expenditures or any cost-savings potential.

Another related challenge was the need for increased strategic planning to manage this increased investment. In 2005, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) recommended the DOD and DOS develop detailed plans for building up and sustaining the ANDSF. In 2007, DOD submitted a five-page document in response, which still lacked suf-



Afghan National Security Force graduation at Kabul Military Training Center. Jul. 29, 2010. NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan/Flickr

15. Terrence K. Kelly, Nora Bensahel, and Olga Oliker, *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2011), p. 23, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1066.pdf; Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Divided Responsibility: Lessons from U.S. Security Sector Assistance in Afghanistan," June 2019, p. 68-69, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-19-39-LL.pdf>.

16. Anthony H Cordesman, "Shaping Afghan National Security Forces." Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 9, 2009, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/shaping-afghan-national-security-forces-0>.

ficient detail for planning and oversight and did not include State's input or describe State's role.¹⁷

An additional oversight challenge relates to equipment. With more resources being delivered, the U.S. government had to take increased actions to monitor, safeguard, and account for that equipment. That proved challenging, as demonstrated by a 2009 GAO report that found a lack of systematic tracking of weapons.¹⁸ Despite that report and recommendations, in 2018, the GAO found again that DOD lacked reliable information on how well Afghan forces were operating and maintaining equipment because of a lack of direct contact with the front-line units that make up three quarters of the Afghan security forces.¹⁹

The results of these resource and scale-related challenges held practical implications for the operational abilities of Afghan forces. The ambitious scale of security assistance also fueled growing needs for weapons and supplies the U.S. and international community could not meet, which led to under-resourcing that deeply impacted morale within the ANDSF. For example, some estimates in 2008 put the ANA at only 60 percent of mission critical items.²⁰ Every new expectation required an increase in resourcing, and the U.S. and international partners were not able to keep pace with their own objectives for the ANDSF. This was further compounded by persistent distribution problems for food, fuel, equipment, ammunition, and maintenance that funding and supply alone could not alleviate.

“FUNDING AND RESOURCES POURED INTO AFGHANISTAN... EXCEEDED WHAT THE ANDSF COULD ABSORB AND APPLY.”

Absorptive Capacity

The sheer amount of funding and resources poured into Afghanistan over the last 20 years greatly exceeded what the ANDSF could absorb and apply. This overload resulted in an inefficient use of resources and a failure to meet benchmarks. Not only that, the excess funding, equipment, and other resources that could not be absorbed quickly also distorted Afghanistan's economy and political stability, from housing and labor markets, to broader

17. U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Further Congressional Action May Be Needed to Ensure Completion of a Detailed Plan to Develop and Sustain Capable Afghan National Security Forces,” June 2008, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-08-661.pdf>.

18. Ibid.

19. U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Some Improvements Reported in Afghan Forces' Capabilities, but Actions Needed to Enhance DOD Oversight of U.S.- Purchased Equipment,” October 2018, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-116>.

20. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, September 2017, p. 48, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf?mod=article_inline.



Afghan National Army Recruits at the Kabul Military Training Center. Jan. 12, 2011. U.S. Navy/DVIDS

corruption that empowered well-positioned politicians and warlords who enriched themselves from the aid economy.²¹ The Taliban, too, received payments from contractors carrying supplies, in return for providing “safe passage.”

Absorptive capacity is often thought of in terms of a recipient state’s inability to receive necessary assistance. However, a better definition might be what CSIS described as “a poor fit between the donor’s understanding of how such problems get resolved and what is actually possible (or desirable) in the local context.”²² In other words, not every aspiration should become a policy. Many are simply not achievable, and many of the Afghanistan strategy documents the authors reviewed appeared to be more aspirational than containing objectives tailored to the local context and time and resources available to achieve them.

A chief example of this poor fit, and Afghanistan’s inability to absorb, or make use of all the resources being thrown at it, is the kind of

weapons systems provided. As SIGAR found, “providing advanced weapons and management systems to a largely illiterate and uneducated force without appropriate training and institutional infrastructure created long-term dependencies, required increased U.S. fiscal support, and extended sustainability timelines.” This phenomenon is deeply related to the above section on paradox of scale. Because of this poor fit, donors ended up throwing even more resources into Afghanistan, creating a spiral of poorly suited interventions, buoyed up by additional interventions to support them. Furthermore, the ever-growing pressure to spend created incentives to do so quickly and without sufficient regard for oversight. In practice, simpler equipment and more training to maintain it may have been more effective.

Low literacy rates within Afghanistan’s security forces and the lack of trainers available to

21. Robert D. Lamb and Kathryn Mixon, “Preface” in *Rethinking Absorptive Capacity: A New Framework, Applied to Afghanistan’s Police Training Program* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2013), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/130617_Lamb_RethinkingAbsorptiveCap_WEB.pdf.

22. *Ibid.*

advise effectively and consistently also contributed to the ANDSF's inability to function fully and independently. The use of advanced weapons and other systems require training and written instructions, and without the ability to effectively impart this knowledge, international advisors inadvertently contributed to an ANDSF that remained dependent on international forces. This was further compounded by a constant churn and rotation of U.S. and NATO trainers that impacted relationship-building and institutional memory.

Strategic Planning and Execution

The scale, scope, and ambitions of the SSA enterprise described above would produce challenges, but strategic planning and execution would also present problems of their own. Defense planners tried to build and execute thoughtfully adapted strategies to stand up and support the ANDSF as a matter of wartime and political necessity. But this too would prove challenging, as planners pivoted to address shorter-term war fighting priorities, frequently shifted strategic visions for the ANDSF, and adapted to new political priorities in the United States.

Warfighting Versus Institution Building

SSA and defense institution building require long-term commitment and focus under the best of circumstances. Over the past two decades in particular, America's web of security partnerships has expanded, as have questions regarding the efficacy of U.S. security assistance. The utility of security assistance in achieving U.S. foreign policy ends, the toxic role SSA can play in fragile states, the bureaucracy of the enterprise within the U.S. government, and persistent challenges in measuring the return on investment for U.S. aid have become increasingly salient areas of concern.

The same challenges that have plagued SSA generally were exponentially magnified by the fact that the U.S. and Afghan governments were parties to a war. Wartime imperatives overlaid with SSA objectives bred new complexities, inefficiencies, and contradictions that would undermine the ANDSF's development.

In fact, warfighting so dominated the U.S. perspective in 2001 that security sector development and reform were initially crowded out of international thinking. Narrow military efforts to dislodge the Taliban and destroy Al Qaeda's sanctuary took precedence over all else, obscuring the need for post-conflict planning, especially in the security sector. Accordingly, in

“WARFIGHTING SO DOMINATED THE U.S. PERSPECTIVE IN 2001 THAT SECURITY SECTOR DEVELOPMENT AND REFORM WERE INITIALLY CROWDED OUT OF INTERNATIONAL THINKING.”

the early days of the war, ANDSF development was a sideshow to the wider war effort.

Later, the apparent defeat of the Taliban and the “success” of the invasion obscured SSA imperatives. A deceptive calm of the immediate post-Taliban period led war-oriented defense planners to deprioritize the security sector, despite the urgent need for capable security services. As a result, security sector assistance and defense institution building lagged behind Afghanistan’s rapidly rising security challenges.²³

Even as the need for a new Afghan security sector became more apparent, and coalition forces began building the foundations of the ANDSF, the U.S. counterterrorism mission remained the top priority, diverting attention and resources away from the SSA effort.²⁴ The question was more one of a need for sustained focus rather than one of resources. Regardless of the size of forces or the resources involved, supporting and sustaining the ANDSF required a sustained strategic focus that was often subsumed by other goals.

Even more disruptive, the ongoing U.S. war effort continued to depend on and empower local militia leaders and warlords at the expense of the formal state-building enterprise in Kabul. As described by Ali Ahmad Jalali, the former Afghan Interior Minister,

Stabilization requires curbing the ability and desire of former combatants to renew violence and transforming militia structures into formal state institutions. This involves replacing war machines with a credible legal and political system, reestablishing public confidence in state institutions, and shifting from a culture of violent opposition to a peaceful competition for power and influence. It is a multifaceted process of “breaking” and “making.”²⁵

Unfortunately, the U.S. found itself unwilling to do the “breaking,” working alongside the very commanders and warlords who competed with Kabul for influence and political power.

As the insurgency gained momentum, managing parallel efforts to dull the Taliban’s advance and simultaneously constructing and staffing a formal Afghan security sector became increasingly difficult. Wartime and defense institution building objectives were often at odds, particularly when it came to simply supplying soldiers for the frontlines. Between the need to create a quality force and the need for quantity of force, the wartime imperative of

23. Terrence K. Kelly, Nora Bensahel, and Olga Oliker, *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts*, (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2011), p. 19-20, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1066.pdf.

24. Ali Ahmad Jalali, “Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces: Mission, Challenges and Sustainability,” *United States Institute of Peace*, May 2016, p. 6-7, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2016/05/afghanistan-national-defense-and-security-forces>.

25. *Ibid*, 6.

quantity consistently won out. Training cycles were frequently shortened, and the end strength of the ANDSF repeatedly increased with the aim not of strengthening security institutions, but of ensuring a sufficient supply of Afghan “trigger-pullers.”

The phenomenon was even more pronounced when it came to the development of the Afghan police sector. The pressing need for a system of law enforcement and criminal investigation was overridden by the need for additional frontline forces to fight the Taliban insurgency.²⁶ Especially after the transition to a conventional counterinsurgency mission, the Afghan police became the “hold” force in the clear and hold strategy pursued by U.S. and Afghan forces.²⁷ As a result, justice and law enforcement systems were virtually non-existent, creating a substantial barrier for progress in state-building and undermining the legitimacy of the central government in the eyes of Afghans.

From the U.S. side, the focus on winning the war distorted institutional incentives to reflect honestly on the ANDSF’s shortcomings. Assessments of the ANDSF were often predisposed to exaggerate their performance, and trainers were routinely encouraged to overstate the effectiveness of Afghan troops.²⁸

Similarly, battlefield necessities frequently led U.S. troops to “take the lead” in joint operations, shielding Afghan forces from experiences and potential failings. Pressure to improve security conditions on the ground coupled with a mandate for Afghans to lead operations



Lt. Col. Obidulla at an Afghan Local Police graduation at Helmand's Regional ALP Training Center. Jun. 6, 2013. U.S. Army/DVIDS

26. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, September 2017, p. 93 and 123, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lesson-learned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf?mod=article_inline.

27. *Ibid*, 93.

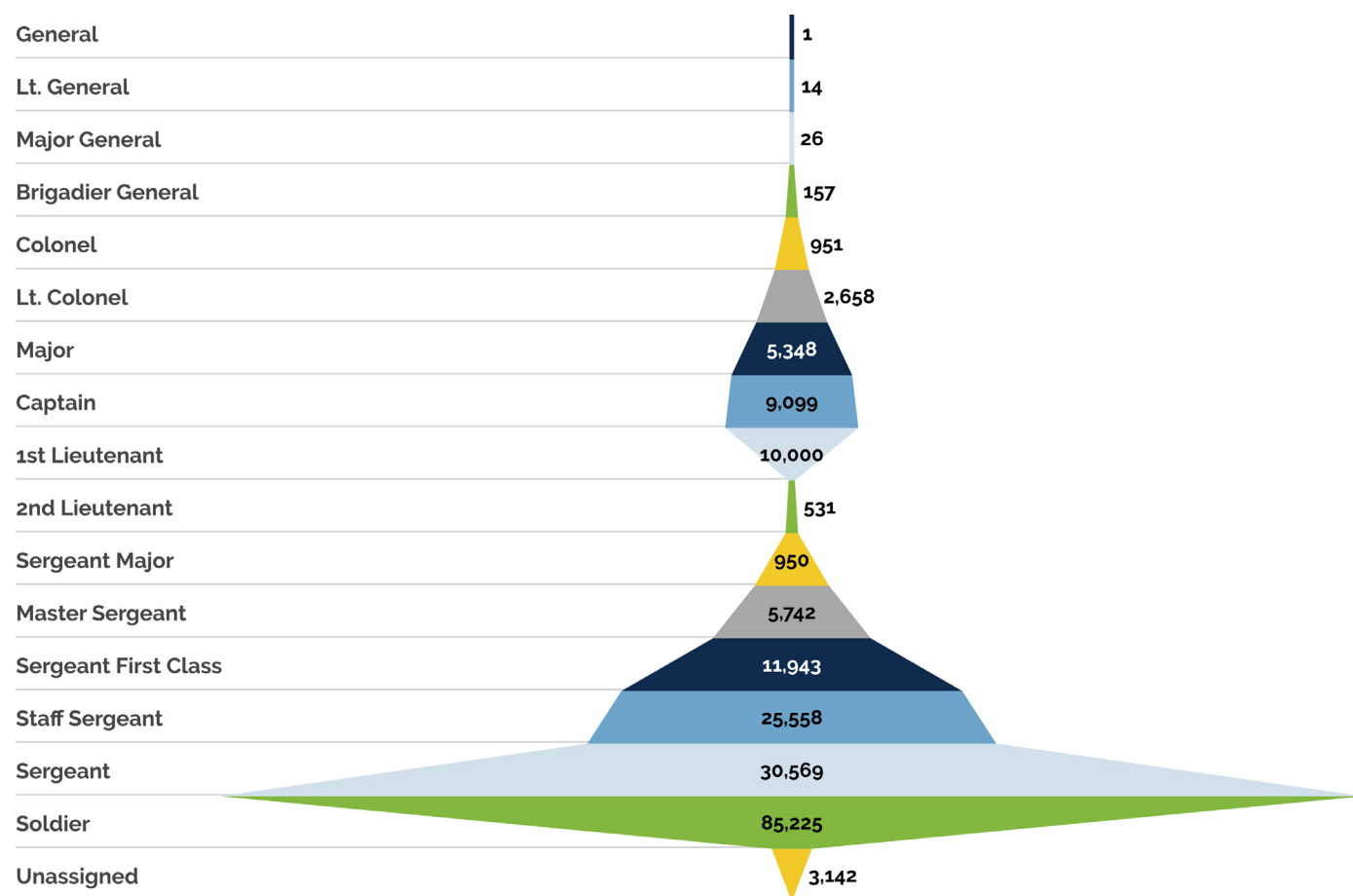
28. *Ibid*, 84.

created an environment “ripe for capacity substitution,” where international forces filled gaps in Afghan capabilities, concealing serious deficiencies in the ANDSF’s performance and abilities.²⁹

Perhaps most poignantly, the American desire to end its longest war is colliding with the chronic dependencies and enduring developmental needs of the Afghan security sector. When the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001, its aim was not the development of an Afghan state. It was the defeat of the Taliban as a means of preventing the territory from being a base of operations for future acts of international terrorism. Over the intervening two decades, state-building became a central component of the U.S. strategy, though only inasmuch as it created conditions for the U.S. to see an end to the conflict. But war-weariness has taken its toll, and the impending withdrawal of international troops raises questions about the ANDSF’s ability to provide security going forward.

Strategic Vision for the ANDSF

END STRENGTH OF ANDSF SUMMARY



29. Ibid, 82; Antonio Giustozzi, “The Afghan National Army: Sustainability Challenges Beyond Financial Aspects,” Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2014, <https://lccn.loc.gov/2014311746>.

American defense planners made determined efforts to cultivate strategic frameworks for the ANDSF's development. These efforts were ambitious, but ultimately the strategic vision for the ANDSF suffered from several limitations.

First, the American vision for Afghanistan's security sector was in frequent misalignment with that of Afghan defense planners, political leaders, and informal security elites, reflecting the competing interests, threat assessments, and priorities of local and international stakeholders.

“THE AMERICAN VISION FOR AFGHANISTAN'S SECURITY SECTOR WAS IN FREQUENT MISALIGNMENT WITH THAT OF AFGHAN DEFENSE PLANNERS, POLITICAL LEADERS, AND INFORMAL SECURITY ELITES.”

Disagreements were present at the outset. As early as 2002, interim Afghan Minister of Defense Mohamad Qasim Fahim, also known as Marshal Fahim Khan, floated the idea of a large territorial army of a quarter-million soldiers, composed of former mujahideen fighters. The U.S. and other coalition partners had a different perspective, envisioning a small professional force of 60-70 thousand, initially to be made “almost from scratch,” without incorporating elements of the militia forces that the U.S. was still operating alongside in its counterterrorism missions.³⁰ This scaled-back approach reflected a more realistic version of what the United States and NATO partners could reasonably support, but also demonstrated differing visions between U.S. and Afghan planners.

The U.S. and its international partners were thinking economically, wanting to minimize the need for enduring international support and troop presence, while maintaining a functional counterterrorism capacity and an army that could place its thumb on the scales of internal conflicts. The Afghans, on the other hand, were thinking broadly, seeing the need for an army that could manage internal security threats and elite competition, as well as regional threats emanating from its near-abroad, including Iran, India, and Pakistan.

Similarly, the views of Afghanistan's network of informal leaders and elites were poorly integrated into planning for the security sector, especially when those views were at odds with the highly centralized state envisioned by international planners.³¹ In reality, Afghanistan's

30. Bonn International Center for Conversion, *Confronting Afghanistan's security dilemma: Reforming the security sector*, Mark Sedra (ed.), September 2003, <https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/bitstream/handle/10625/31021/119547.pdf?sequence=1>.

31. Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 22-23, <https://www.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/law/comparative-law/warlords-strongman-governors-and-state-afghanistan?format=HB&isbn=9781107023925>.



Hamid Karzai, President of Afghanistan from 2004-2014 at a Chatham House London event. Jun. 17, 2016. Chatham House/Flickr

political economy, shaped by decades of conflict, had created new communities of elites at the state's periphery reluctant to divest themselves of newfound power in favor of Kabul. The country's new president, Hamid Karzai, understood that accommodation of informal elites would be central to extending the central government's authority across the country, a notion at odds with the state development paradigm embraced by the U.S. and its partners. Instead, elite accommodation became an implicit reality operating in the shadows of official strategic planning.

Ironically, the United States continued to leverage the informal security sector when political or wartime needs arose. Whatever official state-building planning took place on paper, the U.S. saw practical value in maintaining its network of partnerships with irregular security elites, even at the expense of Kabul. This created a parallel set of relationships that bypassed the central government and elevated the roles of warlords, militia leaders, and strongmen. Similarly, direct engagement with the U.S. came to be seen as a lucrative touchpoint by those same security elites, eager to access foreign patronage and elevate their own political positions. This inconsistency in the American approach can be understood as an effort to manage the reality of informal networks in Afghanistan's security landscape, but nevertheless, worked at cross purposes to the security sector paradigm expressed and agreed to by the U.S. and its coalition partners.

Doctrinally, the U.S. and its international partners advanced highly Westernized defense models for Afghanistan's security sector, irrespective of their suitability for Afghanistan. Though Afghans made their own preferences clear on many occasions, the U.S. and its partners preferred to operate from a familiar playbook, effectively promoting a defense sector without historical roots in Afghanistan. Incongruity between Western and Afghan plans for elements as far ranging as non-commissioned officer corps, civilian ministerial oversight, military ethos, and a centralized defense logistics system, contributed to the construction of a defense sector that was bereft of an Afghan social and cultural foundation.

Additionally, other security structures were excluded. For example, though Afghan leaders

expressed an interest in a gendarmerie force, the unfamiliarity of the concept to U.S. defense planners meant the notion was initially sidelined.³²

Persistent shortcomings in the integration of Afghan perspectives into the strategic vision for the ANDSF naturally undermined Afghan ownership of and commitment to the enterprise. With their needs insufficiently met in a structural manner, various local actors were led to see the ANDSF as a vehicle for satisfying their own parochial interests, irrespective of the strategy developed by U.S. and international partners.

Additionally, the strategy and vision for the ANDSF suffered from a severe lack of consistency, with routine changes that required breakneck re-orientations of the force's structure, missions, and resourcing.

The ambiguity in planning originated in the earliest days of the conflict. The U.S. invasion and early counterterrorism imperatives far outpaced post-conflict planning. By the time the Taliban were removed from power, no coherent strategy for the future of the Afghan security sector was firmly established.

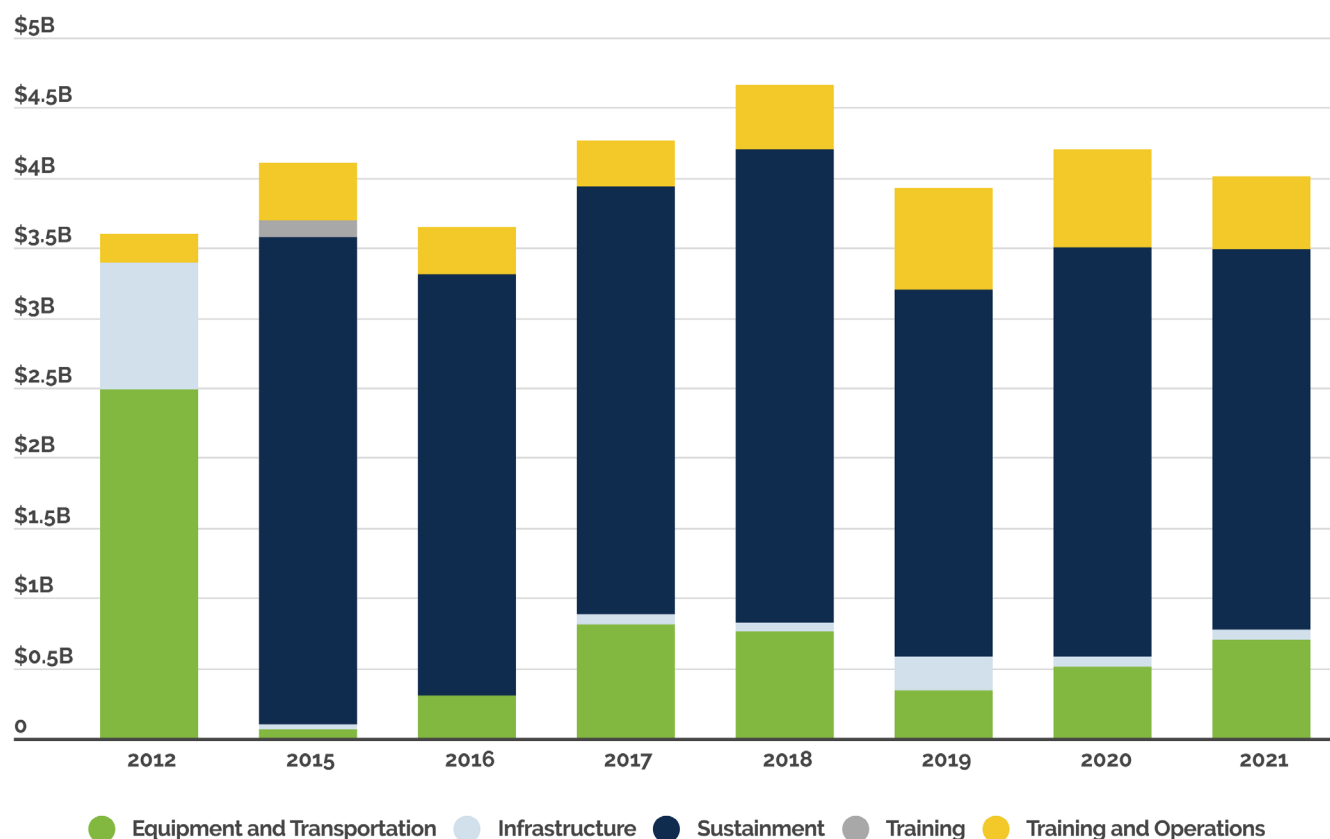
Accordingly, the first iteration of the Afghan Army and Afghan police force was largely a reaction to events on the ground. Despite initial disagreements between local and international stakeholders, an eventual plan for a small, professional, light infantry force able to provide general security in low-intensity conflict became the core of U.S. SSA planning. The development of infantry superseded the development of institutions, reflecting a belief on the U.S. side that its time in Afghanistan would be short lived.



An Afghan Local Police officer during a graduation ceremony at Helmand's Regional ALP Training Center. Jun. 6, 2013. U.S. Army/DVIDS

32. Later, in 2006, the U.S. military and Afghan government did create a gendarmerie, the Afghanistan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP), initially conceived of as a riot control force. Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, "Afghanistan's Civil Order Police: Victim of its Own Success," <https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library2/Policy-and-Research-Papers/Afghanistan-s-Civil-Order-Police-Victim-of-Its-Own-Success>.

ASSISTANCE CATEGORIES OVER TIME



Within three years it was clear that a small, light infantry force was not satisfying the country's defense needs. Fighting was escalating, and the Taliban insurgency was making advances largely unchecked by Kabul. Plans were quickly changed to greatly expand the size of the ANA and ANP. Within another four years, a new administration's comprehensive assessment would call not only for an overhaul of the U.S. war effort but a reorientation of the ANDSF to a combined arms force with a focus on counterterrorism, an evolutionary leap that would drastically increase the logistical, sustainment, and bureaucratic complexities of the force.

With each strategic revamp, added complexities, force structure changes, and new mission sets strained the resources, human capital, and planning structures of the ANDSF and its international supporters. That inconsistency extended to assessment, monitoring, and evaluation (AM&E) regimes, which underwent routine redesigns, making the identification of trends in performance and development over time nearly impossible.³³

33. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, September 2017, p. 112, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessons-learned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf?mod=article_inline.

ASSESSMENT, MONITORING, AND EVALUATION REGIMES



Compounding the inconsistency of vision was the strategic dissonance among coalition partners. Though the United States was by far the largest presence in the SSA enterprise, responsibility remained divided among ISAF members, each with its own doctrines, practices, legal limitations, and strategy for its areas of responsibility. These divisions of responsibility, both thematic and geographic, deeply undercut the unity of effort in Afghanistan's security sector development.



German Police Mentoring Team training new Afghan National Police recruits. May 18, 2010. ResoluteSupportMedia/Flickr

Without robust mechanisms for coordination, strategy development and execution were siloed among various partners. The German effort to develop the ANP is a prime example. Germany's historic role in Afghanistan's law enforcement sector made it an obvious choice to lead the country's police reform effort, and in 2002, Berlin introduced a comprehensive plan for ANP development.

But almost immediately, the German vision began to diverge from the broader strategy being developed by the U.S., reflecting differences in perspectives and assumptions among international partners. In the first place, Germany presumed that being the lead nation for ANP development would obligate it to a coordinating and advising role, not full ownership of the enterprise. Accordingly, the German effort would appear deeply insufficient when judged by the vision of the U.S., the Afghans, and other international partners.

This strategic incongruity was quickly felt on the ground. With its more circumscribed understanding of its share of the undertaking, Germany focused on a civilian-oriented effort to develop an ANP officer corps from Kabul. The majority of German funding was directed to the Kabul Police Academy, with an initial vision of a three-year officer curriculum, which would have taken decades to meet the stated goal of a 62,000-strong police force.

The German top-down approach almost entirely neglected the need for non-officer patrolmen to provide meaningful local security and law enforcement beyond the confines of the capital, empowering irregular security actors and militiamen who filled the ensuing void.

Even after the U.S. stepped in to accelerate ANP development, the parallel but siloed efforts left a substantial gap in Afghanistan's internal security functions. While the Germans built a small highly advanced NCO corps, the U.S. was building what was effectively a heavily armed

paramilitary force made up of so-called patrolmen. In the end, Afghanistan still lacked the sort of law enforcement capabilities that could complement other security institutions.

Much like the German effort, British counternarcotics efforts, French Special Forces training, and other ISAF functions suffered from a lack of coordination and disparate visions of their roles and the roles of their Afghan counterparts.³⁴

Finally, the inconsistency of U.S. strategy reflected not just confusion at the ANDSF planning level, but the variance in U.S. objectives in Afghanistan more broadly. Over the course of two decades, the U.S. conception of its aims in Afghanistan varied widely, from a narrow counterterrorism focus, to an ambitious state-building enterprise, to a desperate effort to extract itself from the conflict altogether. Those discrepancies permeated all levels of U.S. planning, including the U.S. vision for the ANDSF, the resources it was willing to contribute to its development, and the centrality of the security sector in its country-wide strategy.

Strategic Goals vs. Political Exigencies

Throughout the United States' post-9/11 involvement in Afghanistan, the U.S. visions for the ANDSF and the Afghan war effort were at the center of a push and pull between what was strategically sound and what was politically palatable. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the political will behind a demonstration of American resilience and power was high, as was the sense of urgency among policymakers and the American public. But at least initially, state-building remained deeply unappealing to the Bush administration, which came into office expressing skepticism over foreign intervention and stabilization efforts.³⁵

Indeed, 9/11 sparked an early vision of a worldwide conflict—what would eventually be termed the “global war on terror”—that would require a vast but nimble U.S. military posture. Seeing a need to manage domestic



Former President George W. Bush receiving intel about the 9/11 attacks at Emma E. Booker Elementary School. Sept. 11, 2001. The U.S. National Archives/Flickr

34. Ibid, 18.

35. Donald Rumsfeld, “U.S. Financial Commitment,” Memorandum to Secretary of State Colin Powell and Assistant to the President on National Security Affairs Condoleezza Rice, Rumsfeld Papers, April 8, 2002, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1n-Osm3Hh0OK3majhuCGqNSF4H6JXWISBi/view?usp=sharing>.

political support for such an expansive enterprise, key members of the Bush administration opposed large-scale troop deployments and “nation-building,” as it was referred to at the time, even while building up to the Iraq War.³⁶

That vision defined the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan as well as the absence of robust post-conflict planning. According to this perspective, the U.S. would achieve its narrowly defined counterterrorism objectives with a small number of U.S. troops marshalling local forces to bear the brunt of the fighting. The security landscape post-conflict would be for the Afghans to decide and other international or multilateral partners to manage. Even as the need to support a burgeoning Afghan defense sector became apparent, key decision makers in the Bush administration saw security sector support as a political, as well as financial, vulnerability. In a 2002 memo, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld went as far as to say that the U.S. financial commitment to the nascent Afghan army “should be zero.”³⁷ That perspective was soon to change, albeit fitfully. As the Taliban insurgency gained momentum, the need for a change in strategy became apparent, and with large deployments of U.S. forces neither politically possible or strategically advisable, expanding support for the ANDSF became the centerpiece of the war effort.

“WITH THE GRAVITATIONAL CENTER OF THE U.S. MILITARY ENTERPRISE SET SQUARELY IN IRAQ, THE EFFICACY OF U.S. AFGHAN POLICY DIMINISHED IN POLITICAL RELEVANCE IN THE UNITED STATES.”

Meanwhile, U.S. policy in Afghanistan was soon to be utterly eclipsed by the U.S. conventional invasion of Iraq. It is difficult to overstate the impact of the invasion of Iraq on the Afghan war effort, and doing so in detail is beyond the scope of this report. Nevertheless, the sidelining of Afghanistan in American political consciousness is worth noting. With the gravitational center of the U.S. military enterprise set squarely in Iraq, the efficacy of U.S. Afghan policy diminished in political relevance in the United States.

This phenomenon contributed to a cycle in which a lack of public interest in Afghanistan exacerbated its neglect by defense planners. In practical terms, the impact on U.S. operations in Afghanistan, which were increasingly focused on building up the ANDSF, were perennially

36. Donald Rumsfeld, “Beyond ‘Nation-Building,’” *Washington Post*, September 25, 2003, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2003/09/25/beyond-nation-building/dc884ed9-f1e4-4ef8-b2e2-9812ae80e4ef/>.

37. Donald Rumsfeld, “U.S. Financial Commitment,” Memorandum to Secretary of State Colin Powell and Assistant to the President on National Security Affairs Condoleezza Rice, Rumsfeld Papers, April 8, 2002, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1n-Osm3Hh0OK3majhuCGqNSF4H6JXWISBi/view?usp=sharing>.



Former President Barack Obama at a dignified transfer ceremony for personnel who died in Afghanistan. Aug. 9, 2011. U.S. Navy/DVIDS

under-resourced.³⁸ Funding, staffing, and political attention frequently lagged behind strategy.

By the time of the 2008 election, however, security in Afghanistan had deteriorated to such an extent that righting the war effort rose as a national security priority. Nevertheless, the Obama administration had to balance perspectives on what was strategically necessary with what was politically prudent. While Obama's military leaders believed success in Afghanistan could only be achieved by a vastly expanded ANDSF, which would first require a surge of U.S. troops and resources, the president was wary. The political costs of expanding the war effort after having campaigned on ending nearly a decade of U.S. conflict could be significant, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis.³⁹

Accordingly, the eventual strategy represented a compromise between political palatability and the best military advice of Obama's top brass. Though the Secretary of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, ISAF, and the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) all supported a surge of at least 40,000 soldiers to conduct classic counter-insurgency operations, the president eventually elected a "hybrid" strategy, deploying a smaller force, with narrower aims than those proposed by military leaders, and with an explicit timetable for an eventual drawdown.⁴⁰

In this case, as with others that would follow, domestic political appetites for expanding

38. Matthew C. Brand, *General McCrystal's Strategic Assessment: Evaluating the Operating Environment in Afghanistan in the Summer of 2009* (Alabama: Air University Press, 2011), p. X, https://media.defense.gov/2017/Jun/19/2001765050/-1/0/AP_BRAND_MCCHRYSTALS_ASSESSMENT.PDF, (1-2), (2-1)

39. Frank G. Hoffman and G. Alexander Crowther. "Strategic Assessment and Adaptation: The Surges in Iraq and Afghanistan," in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from The Long War*, ed. Richard D Hooker Jr. and Joseph J. Collins. (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2015), p. 120, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1T3dZ3czlcF3EUPSIFc9UEMLp5fdPHSIS/view?usp=sharing>.

40. *Ibid*, 116-117.

operations in Afghanistan were balanced against the broadly accepted notions of what was needed to achieve outcomes in Afghanistan. In this balancing act, political considerations resulted in strategic and military changes.

From the Afghan side, ambiguity in the U.S. commitment bred its own political realities. With uncertainty as to how American political life would influence the highly unsettled U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, Afghans understandably hedged. Wavering international commitments created incentives for Afghan elites to maintain their own informal patronage networks and parallel security institutions at the expense of the highly centralized state being constructed in Kabul. In some cases, the formal and informal overlapped, and in others, they collided.

“THE U.S. ALSO ACTIVELY CREATED POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR AFGHANISTAN’S STRONGMEN THAT RAN COUNTER TO THE STRATEGIC VISION FOR THE COUNTRY’S SECURITY SECTOR.”

But while the phenomenon may have inadvertently empowered informal networks and power structures, the U.S. also actively created political opportunities for Afghanistan’s strongmen that ran counter to the strategic vision for the country’s security sector. In the first place, U.S. counterterror operations in Afghanistan continued to depend on militia leaders, who saw political value in maintaining a direct line to their American patrons that bypassed Kabul. That bilateral relationship with Washington created a political symbiosis that encouraged informal elites to maintain their own martial resources as a means of providing value to the United States, whose partnership, in turn, provided political leverage for those same elites vying for their share of Afghanistan.

Indeed, the U.S. effort to manage the reality of Afghanistan’s informal security landscape frequently ran counter to efforts to formalize the security sector. The need to co-opt Afghanistan’s strongmen and militia leaders to preempt spoilers in the country’s state building enterprise resulted in its own form of informal patronage, doled out by Washington and Kabul. In other cases, the U.S. saw wartime benefits from maintaining direct relationships, often deeply personalized, with actors outside official state structures. In this environment, enterprising strongmen saw opportunity in the security sector, either by leveraging access to the official ANDSF or providing irregular security value to the U.S. and others.

As such, the U.S. became deeply integrated into the informal political competition among Afghanistan’s elites, and even as it tried to diffuse tensions and reach accommodations with various actors, the engagement itself would prove legitimizing to many of the country’s political entrepreneurs.



A Pashtun mountain village in Khost Province, Afghanistan. June 8, 2009. Indiana Public Media/Flickr

That competition was often fierce, and in some cases proceeded at the expense of the formal state building enterprise envisioned by the international community. Factional groupings defined by crosscutting identities—familial, local, regional, tribal, ethnic, and otherwise—sought to balance against one another, an act that frequently played out in the security sector. Domination of key security posts by Northern Alliance factions and the marginalization of certain ethnic groups, particularly Pashtun, undermined official security institutions and served as a rationale for the maintenance of informal security structures.

This is not to say that management of elites or foreign engagement with local strongmen was completely ill-advised. Many have argued that the hybrid approach of working with local elites, compromising with informal leaders, and allowing, at least tacitly, for patronage to co-opt potential spoilers has been essential to extending the central government to places in the country's periphery.

Rather, the approach controverts the state development professed and outlined by international partners throughout their involvement in Afghanistan, creating contradictions among the coalition in the execution of SSA. These inconsistencies extended to the approach of individual coalition members. For the United States, implicit understandings of the need to accommodate, manage, or leverage the informal political architecture of the country may not have been broadly understood across various U.S. government agencies, or even within those agencies, exacerbating inconsistencies in the overall U.S. approach to SSA.

Social and Political Legacies

Social, historical, and cultural contexts of recipient nations all strongly influence SSA outcomes. According to the U.S. military's own doctrine on security cooperation, an initial assessment of any security cooperation endeavor should examine partner nations' own objectives and capabilities for security assistance, and other factors, including analysis of "relevant environmental, economic, political, sociological, cultural, and other conditions that may directly impact the implementation of the initiative in a specific country."⁴¹

INITIAL AND FOLLOW-ON ASSESSMENT

Analysis derived from an initial assessment should directly inform an initiative design document and related country plans in appropriate sections. Initial assessments should include the following elements:

- (1) The extent to which an allied or partner nation shares relevant strategic objectives with the United States, as well as a partner's current ability to contribute to missions that address such shared objectives, and gaps in partner ability to contribute to shared interests, including capability shortfalls based on detailed and holistic analysis of relevant partner capabilities such as through application of the doctrine, organizational structure, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy framework referenced in Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 3170.01, Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System (JCIDS).
- (2) Analysis of potential risks, including assumptions and possible consequences of implementing and not implementing the initiative, program, or activity.
- (3) Information to inform initiative design, including available contextual data, baselines, suggested objectives, indicators and milestones, as well as recommendations on what can be achieved within a given timeframe with anticipated resources.
- (4) Analysis of relevant environmental, economic, political, sociological, cultural, and other conditions that may directly impact the implementation of the initiative in a specific country.
- (5) The feasibility of achieving objectives based on a partner's political willingness to pursue them; its absorptive capacity, including the extent to which a partner can support, employ, and sustain assistance independently; its political stability; and its respect for rule of law and human rights.
- (6) Analysis of other related United States Government, nongovernmental, and international organizations, and other stakeholder efforts that are underway or planned, including how the security cooperation initiative may complement or compete with other programs or activities.
- (7) Other relevant information, assessments, completed evaluations and related documents that provide context for the initial assessment process.

Department of Defense Instruction 5132.14, *Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation Policy for the Security Cooperation Enterprise*.

41. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3-20, Security Cooperation, May 23, 2017, p. V-3, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_20_20172305.pdf.

In the case of Afghanistan, the urgency of the post-9/11 environment meant virtually no such considerations were made prior to the invasion. Indeed, as the Taliban was swept from power, SSA was hardly in the minds of U.S. defense planners, much less how SSA might interact with Afghanistan's local context.

Though a holistic assessment of Afghanistan's social, historical, and cultural contexts is beyond this scope of this report, several important legacies have held significant consequences for the SSA effort, and a lack of attention to them would impact SSA in the years to come.

Governance in Kabul and Periphery

Afghanistan's military and security history has been shaped by a decentralized political order that favors self-reliant, local communities and a multiplicity of military institutions.⁴² The ability of the state's governing and military structures to extend their

authorities beyond Kabul have waxed and waned over time. At various times in its history, Afghanistan's central government has sought to centralize power, in some cases with relative success, doing so through both force and engagement with local authorities. But broadly speaking, Afghanistan has historically embraced a decentralized approach to security. This is in contrast to U.S.-led security assistance efforts in Afghanistan, which focused on building highly centralized security forces, similar to that of the United States, with little input from local governments into how those forces would operate in the provinces.

Afghanistan's historic engagement with its provinces has important implications for the difficulties of building up a state-centric government and security forces. With the state's limited practical ability to administer its authority in its hinterland, local officials and traditional authorities traditionally took the place of state institutions. As such, local communities have long held significant roles in governance, justice, and security in Afghanistan.



Children play on a tank carcass on Bibi Maru Hill in Kabul. Dec. 10, 2005. swiss.frog/Flickr

42. Ali Ahmad Jalali, *A Military History of Afghanistan: From the Great Game to the Global War on Terror 1800-2015* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), https://search.lib.virginia.edu/sources/uva_library/items/u7049548.

“THE TALIBAN SUCCESSFULLY MIMICKED AFGHANISTAN’S HISTORICALLY DIFFUSE POWER STRUCTURES AND MILITARY ARCHITECTURE... BUILDING INFLUENCE IN DISPARATE PARTS OF THE COUNTRY.”

Under the rule of the Musahibans dynasty (1929-1978), Afghanistan developed a relatively advanced and modern defense establishment, aided by substantial foreign assistance, while leaving traditional peripheral power structures intact. The Musahibans exempted some Pashtun tribes from military service and established a strategy to engage tribes in southern and eastern Afghanistan alongside a nationwide modernization effort.⁴³ Mohammed Zahir Shah, who was in power between 1933 and 1973, supported village-level defense forces that operated in eastern Afghanistan.⁴⁴

The modernization of the Afghan state and its armed forces left physical and doctrinal legacies, but the following decades of war would transform those legacies. The Soviet invasion and ensuing civil war transformed the very fabric of Afghan society, eroding long-standing

mechanisms for managing hardship and strife, empowering new elites, and creating opportunities for violent foreign interventions. Social and military organizations honed for fighting the Soviet occupation would have enduring consequences, particularly for the U.S. invasion. The disintegration of the state generated new axes of internal conflict, powered by personal armies arrayed increasingly along ethnic lines.

It was in this environment that the Taliban was able to seize power, expanding from strongholds in Kandahar to dominate much of the country in just four years. Leveraging widespread dissatisfaction with the lawlessness fueled by the diffusion of local conflicts, and with support from Pakistan and marginalized Pashtuns, it controlled as much of 90 percent of Afghanistan before the 2001 invasion.

Significantly, the Taliban leveraged the historical legacies of center-periphery engagement, even after it was deposed in the 2001 U.S. invasion. As it sought to reassert control, the group reorganized as a diffuse network that could recruit and find support from local communities and exploit grievances with the central government in Kabul, while its leadership remained in Pakistan.⁴⁵ Even more so than the Afghan government, the Taliban successfully mimicked Afghanistan’s historically diffuse power structures and military architecture, thus

43. Seth G. Jones, “Going Local: The Key to Afghanistan,” The RAND Blog, August 8, 2009, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2009/08/going-local-the-key-to-afghanistan.html>.

44. Ibid.

45. Mujib Mashal, “How the Taliban Outlasted a Superpower: Tenacity and Carnage,” New York Times, May 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/world/asia/taliban-afghanistan-war.html>.

reaching deep into local communities, building influence in disparate parts of the country, and operating in places where the influence of Kabul is largely absent.

The implications for a future SSA enterprise would be significant. With little advanced planning, urgency in the need to address growing levels of insecurity, and no doctrinal foundation for SSA at this scale, the U.S. disregarded Afghanistan's traditional power and security structures and elected to model Afghanistan's nascent security forces after its own image.



Ministry of Education official meets with Zabul village elders to discuss education in the region. Sep. 17, 2009. ResoluteSupportMedia/Flickr

Human Capital and Infrastructure

As a result of years of conflict, insecurity, a lack of schools, and high dropout rates, Afghanistan's literacy rates are low, and that extends to its security forces. The Afghan Ministry of Education has estimated that only one-third of the Afghan population can read or write, while approximately 13 percent of ANDSF are literate.⁴⁶ By other accounts, the percentage of literacy within the ANDSF recruits was closer to five percent.⁴⁷ The literacy rate among police is slightly higher than that of military forces. Beyond basic instruction, literacy, including math skills, is important in the armed forces and police to manage and account for equipment and salaries, read instructions for maintaining vehicles and other equipment, read and record serial numbers of equipment, read maps to share locations, and make written

46. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Afghan National Security Forces: Despite Reported Successes, Concerns Remain about Literacy Program Results, Contract Oversight, Transition, and Sustainment." 14-30 Audit Report, Arlington, Virginia: SIGAR, January 2014, p. 4, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/sigar_14-30-ar.pdf.

47. Sanjeev Miglani, "Afghan forces need reading lessons before security transfer," Reuters, June 22, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-security-training/afghan-forces-need-reading-lessons-before-security-transfer-idUSBRE85L05V20120622>.

reports to headquarters, among other duties. Literacy also helps with higher-level learning comprehension and understanding of concepts such as human rights and the rule of law.

The lack of literacy and educational opportunities throughout Afghanistan impacts its security forces even more than the regular population. Because working for security forces is dangerous and poorly paid but offers steady employment, recruits often come from the poorest sectors of Afghan society, with lower literacy rates than the general population.

That said, a lack of educational opportunity doesn't necessarily make a poor soldier. Many Afghan soldiers who lacked opportunities in formal education have learned skills through other means, including memorization and observational learning.

As a result, many security force personnel benefit from pedagogy that more closely mirrors the way many adapted to learn—ways that differ from American or European educational training systems.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, most international trainers and advisors did not possess significant training and background in teaching and expectations for personnel who lacked the benefit of a formal education, resulting in a mismatch between trainers and trainees, and between training ambitions and results.

Ethnic and Tribal Divisions and Gender Roles

Although Afghanistan's constitution references 14 ethnicities and "other tribes," four ethnic groups are most dominant in Afghanistan's politics: Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks.⁴⁹ On top of Afghanistan's diversity of ethnic communities, many militias and non-state armed groups formed as a result of foreign intervention and civil war. A breakdown of central authority and conflict over the years led to the dominance of non-state patronage networks, whose leaders often invoked ethnic references to legitimize their power.⁵⁰

“MOST INTERNATIONAL TRAINERS AND ADVISORS DID NOT POSSESS SIGNIFICANT TRAINING AND BACKGROUND IN TEACHING AND EXPECTATIONS FOR PERSONNEL WHO LACKED THE BENEFIT OF A FORMAL EDUCATION.”

48. Thomas E. Ricks, "Literacy versus military effectiveness: Thoughts from an Army cultural expert," *Foreign Policy*, February 3, 2011. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/02/03/literacy-versus-military-effectiveness-thoughts-from-an-army-cultural-expert/>.

49. Clayton Thomas, "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief," U.S. Library of Congress: Congressional Research Service, July 18, 2019, p. 33, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=827316>.

50. Ali Ahmad Jalali, "Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces: Mission, Challenges and Sustainability." United States Institute of Peace, May 2016, p. 6, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW115-Afghanistan-National-Defense-and-Security-Forces-Mission-Challenges-and-Sustainability.pdf>.

In the 1990s, opposition to the Taliban led a variety of ethnic communities to rally around the Tajik-led anti-Taliban movement to form the broader “Northern Alliance,” which also included Uzbek, Hazara Shiite, and some Pashtun Islamist factions.

Unfortunately, throughout the formation of the Afghan Army and other institutions, ethnic and tribal divisions have impeded confidence and the development of fully unified forces. After the Taliban’s removal in 2001, officials representing the Northern Alliance took key security positions and favored ethnic Tajiks in security force recruitment. Initially, many Pashtuns then refused recruitment, until the appointment of a Pashtun as Defense Minister in late 2004.⁵¹ To its credit, the United States attempted to course correct after initial missteps and began to recruit directly, keeping ethnic balances in mind.⁵²



Afghan National Army soldiers training at the Military Training Center in Kabul. Jan. 26, 2010. Helmandblog/Lt. Sally Armstrong/Flickr

Even so, the ANDSF struggled with the same ethnic rivalries impacting the rest of Afghanistan. In 2008, approximately 70 percent of Afghan battalion commanders were Tajik. By 2012, that number had dropped to 40 percent.⁵³ The ANA has been nominally balanced, although it has long struggled to recruit southern Pashtuns.

These rivalries have many implications for security assistance efforts. Despite domestic and international efforts to balance Afghanistan’s security institutions, systems of patronage that follow ethnic identities run deep and risk fracturing Afghanistan’s security forces further.

Finally, cultural roles of women in Afghanistan have also impacted women’s integration

51. Kenneth Katzman and Clayton Thomas, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy,” U.S. Library of Congress: Congressional Research Service, December 13, 2017, p. 32 <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf>.

52. Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. And The Disaster In Pakistan, Afghanistan, And Central Asia* (New York, NY: Penguin Books), 2009, p.202, ISBN 9780143115571, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/530606/descent-into-chaos-by-ahmed-rashid/>.

53. Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Afghan National Security Forces: Afghan Corruption and the Development of an Effective Fighting Force,” Brookings, August 2, 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/afghan-national-security-forces-afghan-corruption-and-the-development-of-an-effective-fighting-force/>.



Women, children, and coalition forces meet in Urgan District to discuss concerns. Mar. 31, 2011. SrA Ashley Avecilla/DVIDS

and career advancement within security forces. For example, some women fear wearing their uniforms while traveling to work for fear of harassment. And the prevalence of sexual abuse, harassment, and gender-based violence threatens the integration and retention of women in the ANDSF. To its credit, the Afghan Defense Ministry approved a sexual harassment and sexual assault policy in 2018 and began training in it. The Afghan Interior Ministry has also taken some steps to address gender-based issues, including by establishing units across the country focused on domestic violence.⁵⁴ The further integration of women into security issues would extend the ANDSF's ability to build trust among citizens and address these and other issues.

Regional Tensions and Competing Interests in Afghanistan

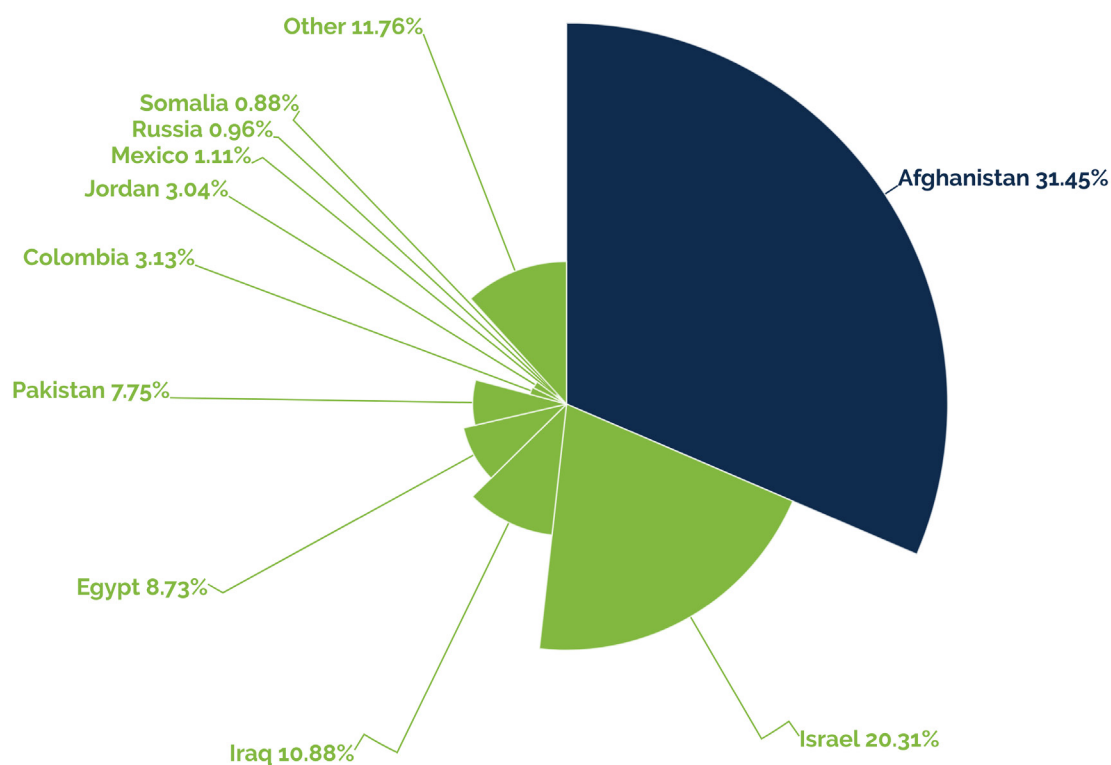
Competing regional powers present another layer of challenges to an already complicated security dynamic in Afghanistan. The failure of the United States to fully appreciate and manage those dynamics deeply impacted the success of security operations.

The Soviet occupation had enormous social and political consequences that would make security assistance more difficult in the decades to come. Efforts by fighters opposing the Soviets to protect supply routes and create defensive positions would later lead to power centers for warlords and other fighters in mountains and valleys. And the Soviet experience solidified a powerful local resistance to any foreign occupation. All of this laid the groundwork for ethnically driven power struggles, civil war, new elites, and heavily armed mini-states.⁵⁵

54. Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," Report to Congress, Washington D.C., June 2019, p. 29, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/12/2002156816/-1/-1/1/ENHANCING-SECURITY-AND-STABILITY-IN-AFGHANISTAN.PDF>.

55. Ali Ahmad Jalali, *A Military History of Afghanistan: From the Great Game to the Global War on Terror 1800-2015* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), p. 457, https://search.lib.virginia.edu/sources/uva_library/items/u7049548.

SHARE OF U.S. SECURITY ASSISTANCE SINCE FY2001



In more recent times, Pakistan, most notably, has undermined U.S. and international efforts and worked to ensure its own influence in Afghanistan by bolstering its own favored groups within the country. One of United States' greatest missteps in security assistance efforts was a failure to address Pakistan's influence earlier.

Cross-border insurgencies are notoriously difficult to defeat. And yet the United States was sensitive to its relationship with Pakistan and unable or unwilling to prevent Islamabad from its practice of providing support and sanctuary to Taliban leadership.

Pakistan and India are both invested in their own strategic advantages in Afghanistan, with India seeking to strengthen Kabul's government and eliminating a safe haven for terrorists, and Pakistan focused on limiting India's influence through a weak Afghan government dominated by a supportive Taliban.⁵⁶ Countering India's geopolitical advantage has long been a core objective of Pakistan.⁵⁷

56. Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk, "India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the Region," RAND Corporation, 2012, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP387.pdf.

57. Ali Ahmad Jalali, "Regional Perspectives on The Afghan Peace Process," Unipath Magazine, January 4, 2021, https://unipath-magazine.com/regional-perspectives-on-the-afghan-peace-process/?fbclid=IwAR0Jj4hnbveKgisXjLY3nWrPUI1R_pzgvpZEW1fTlwVvhH_1FqFV9GnR_Mw.

In practical terms, that has resulted in Taliban and other fighters slipping over the border from Afghanistan into Pakistan, eluding Afghan security forces, and making their efforts toward establishing security much more difficult. Worse, Pakistan's military intelligence service, the ISI, has armed and financed the Taliban and other militant groups sympathetic to Pakistan.

Despite these opposing goals, the United States long relied on Pakistan's cooperation and has provided Pakistan with more than 23 billion in military assistance

since 2001, while seeking to limit India's involvement in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, neither resulted in reducing Pakistan's support for militancy and terrorism in Afghanistan. Pakistan has played an often conflicting role in Afghanistan, at times allowing the United States to use its air space, ports, and roads, while at the same time harboring and advising Taliban leadership,⁵⁸ and ultimately undermining support for a political settlement.⁵⁹ Pakistan's support for fundamentalist groups is a longstanding policy that stretches back to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, when it worked with Saudi Arabia to support Islamist fundamentalist groups.

As reporter Mark Mazzetti put it, "The United States had stumbled into an informal, unspoken bargain, accepting help from Pakistan in the fight against Al Qaeda in exchange for tacitly enabling, while feebly contesting, Pakistan's efforts to sabotage the American-led campaign in Afghanistan."⁶⁰

U.S. security assistance to Pakistan has been in steady decline since a high of \$2.7 billion in 2010. Meanwhile, India has been the largest regional contributor to Afghanistan's recon-



Pakistani Police standing alert amidst tensions in Quetta, Pakistan following U.S. air strikes in neighboring Afghanistan. Oct. 10, 2001. Paula Bronstein/Getty Images

58. Afghanistan Study Group, "Afghanistan Study Group Final Report," United States Institute of Peace, February 2021, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/afghanistan_study_group_final_report_a_pathway_for_peace_in_afghanistan.pdf.

59. Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk, "India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the Region," RAND Corporation, 2012, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP387.pdf.

60. Mark Mazzetti, "The Devastating Paradox of Pakistan," The Atlantic, March 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/03/the-pakistan-trap/550895/>.

struction, while shying away from a deeper military relationship with Afghanistan.⁶¹

Russia and Iran have taken positions in Afghanistan that also undermine peace and stability. Despite opposing the Taliban government of the late 1990s, both nations now see the Taliban as useful leverage against the United States.⁶²

Iran, as with other neighboring countries, seeks to exert its own influence in Afghanistan and has an opportunistic relationship with the Taliban.⁶³ It also has a particular interest in supporting Afghanistan's Shia populations and ensuring that Afghanistan cannot be used by U.S. forces against Iran. This has resulted in a policy of Iran protecting Taliban insurgent elements in Afghanistan. Although Iran initially cooperated with the United States in Afghanistan, the lead up to the Iraq War and being branded as part of the "Axis of Evil" made continued cooperation virtually impossible.

Since 2014, Russia has been increasingly involved in Afghanistan, and while ostensibly committed to containing extremist threats in Afghanistan, has also undermined those efforts by directly funding militant groups. In recent years, Russia has formed a relationship with the Taliban that it justifies by citing the Islamic State as a common enemy.⁶⁴ Like Pakistan's bid to counter India, Russia increasingly views Afghanistan as a theater to counter U.S. influence. There are even reports that Russia is funneling resources into Afghanistan that can be sold for profit by the Taliban, this giving them a significant source of funding.⁶⁵ This funding then provides the Taliban with the ability to launch attacks against Afghan targets.

Finally, China and the United States also share an interest for stability in Afghanistan, which would bolster the multi-billion-dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project. China would also benefit from access to Afghanistan's natural resources. China generally supports

"ALTHOUGH IRAN INITIALLY COOPERATED WITH THE U.S. IN AFGHANISTAN...BEING BRANDED AS PART OF THE 'AXIS OF EVIL' MADE CONTINUED COOPERATION VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE."

61. Clayton Thomas, "Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief," U.S. Library of Congress: Congressional Research Service, March 25, 2021, p. 13, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45122.pdf>.

62. Ibid, 14.

63. Ali Ahmad Jalali, "Regional Perspectives on The Afghan Peace Process," Unipath Magazine, January 4, 2021, https://unipath-magazine.com/regional-perspectives-on-the-afghan-peace-process/?fbclid=IwAR0Jj4hnbveKgisXjLY3nWrPUI1R_pzgvpZEW1fTlwVvhH_1FqFV9GnR_Mw.

64. Afghanistan Study Group, "Afghanistan Study Group Final Report," United States Institute of Peace, February 2021, p. 41, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/afghanistan_study_group_final_report_a_pathway_for_peace_in_afghanistan.pdf.

65. Sajjan M. Gohel and Allison Bailey, "This Time, Russia Is in Afghanistan to Win," Foreign Policy, July 1, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/01/russia-afghansitan-united-states-bountygate/>.

international efforts in Afghanistan but refrains from direct military involvement.⁶⁶

The result of all this, unfortunately for Afghan security forces, is a deeply complicated conflict zone, with an array of international players diminishing the prospects of any lasting stability.



Former President George W. Bush greeting U.S. Army Soldiers at Bagram Air Base. Dec. 14, 2008. The U.S. Army/Flickr

U.S. Political and Institutional Contexts

If Afghanistan is a product of its neighborhood and historical context, so too of course is the United States—equally bound up in its own views and national interests, the forces acting upon it, and its own cultural context.

In 2001 when the United States launched military operations in Afghanistan, it did so in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the United States, on a wave of heightened emotions and a determination to eliminate the risk of terrorism coming from Afghanistan.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this connection. There was a heightened sense in the United States that policymakers needed to do something—and quickly—in proportion to the impact on the United States of losing some 3,000 lives in the 9/11 attacks. That desire, fueled by an American brand of optimism, would then set the stage for an increasingly ambitious and complicated endeavor over the years to come. Thus, after the 9/11

66. Zhao Huasheng, “China and Afghanistan: China’s Interests, Stances, and Perspectives,” Center For International Studies, March 2012, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/120322_Zhao_ChinaAfghan_web.pdf.

“IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO FULLY UNDERSTAND THE EARLIEST DAYS OF U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN WITHOUT ALSO NOTING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WAR IN IRAQ.”

attacks, when the Taliban refused to extradite Bin Laden, the United States set to overthrow the Taliban and began combat operations in Afghanistan. It did so initially with a focus on tactical operations and little initial planning for reconstruction.

Multiple interviewees expressed to the authors the impact of the U.S. military’s “can do” culture—one that prioritized getting things done without too many questions about whether the goals set out were feasible. Multiple interviewees also described a sense that dissent, if not explicitly discouraged, was not encouraged. And this served to tamp down the voices that could have helped rightsize expectations for security assistance in Afghanistan.

America’s earliest days in Afghanistan focused on air strikes and other military operations at the expense of longer-term planning for reconstruction. As former President George W. Bush would later acknowledge in his memoir, despite America’s lofty ambitions in Afghanistan, “Our government was not prepared for national building.”⁶⁷

As noted in above sections, it is impossible to fully understand the earliest days of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan without also noting the importance of the war in Iraq. The Bush administration tended to view Afghanistan as a necessary objective on the way to the coming war with Iraq, and as a result, deprived the Afghanistan effort of resources in the early years. Former National Security Council terrorism adviser Richard Clarke has said he believes that was due to a reluctance to become enmeshed in Afghanistan in the way that Russia had been, to save forces for the war in Iraq, and a desire by then-Defense Secretary Rumsfeld to prove that small numbers of ground troops, together with airpower, could win decisive battles.⁶⁸ Only in 2003 did the United States begin to devote significantly more funding into Afghanistan for reconstruction and security—a decision that would impact wartime and security assistance efforts over the years to come.

There are many other practical implications of this rush into Afghanistan that resulted from the impetus to do a lot and to do it quickly, without sufficient attention to processes and risks. And without a culture that encouraged questioning about the scale of U.S. ambitions

67. Paul D Miller, “Bush on Nation Building and Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy*, November 17, 2010, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/11/17/bush-on-nation-building-and-afghanistan/>.

68. Seymour M. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), p. 147, <https://www.harpercollins.com/products/chain-of-command-seymour-m-hersh?variant=32122383695906>.

in Afghanistan, and a relative optimism about their feasibility, there was little impetus to scale back from what would ultimately become a 20-plus year operation to defeat Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and rebuild a viable Afghan state with a minimal loss of lives.

One critical example of this rush into Afghanistan without sufficient preparation or consideration of the risks was documented by SIGAR, when it found that the Defense Department did not ensure that all uniformed personnel complete advisor training before deploying to Afghanistan as advisors to Afghanistan's Defense and Interior ministries, despite a CENTCOM requirement that all advisors attend such trainings.

Furthermore, when training did take place, it often reflected the separate and distinct trainings present within various branches of the U.S. military. U.S. advisors to the Afghan ministries might receive separate trainings according to which branch of the military they served in, or whether they were civilians or occupied other government positions. Such trainings were often inconsistent with each other, and as a single Afghan ministry could have hundreds or more of U.S. and international trainers, it was almost impossible to advise according to a common approach or strategic goals. In other words, America's own stovepiped military training replicated itself in an often disjointed approach to training and advising in Afghanistan.

Additionally, as described further above under Strategic Planning and Execution, Afghanistan is one of the most politicized security assistance efforts ever faced by the United States. With that politicization, it has been subject to dramatic oscillations, from administration to administration, according to the U.S. political mood and expediency and administration governing. Thus, the American political culture of oscillating politics and new strategies created an additional challenge, resulting in short-term political goals subject to revision, that were reflected in shifting U.S. strategies and operations on the ground.

There is one final critical aspect to U.S. security cooperation, and that is that the U.S. ap-



Afghan Local Police officers disassembling AK-47s while blindfolded during an ALP graduation. Jun. 6, 2013. U.S. Army/DVIDS

proach to security assistance has never been only about building capabilities for other security forces. U.S. security assistance also prioritizes U.S. weapons and equipment. As one interviewee put it, if the United States really only cared about building capacity, they could have just let Afghanistan keep Russian weapons. Instead, the U.S. conception of security cooperation has always prioritized American arms, American training, and American relationships. Likewise, in Afghanistan, the U.S. approach fostered a long-term dependence on U.S. support and U.S. weapons systems. The risk of such an approach, of course, is the United States creating a dependency so large that it begins to believe it can never leave.

LESSONS LEARNED

Although it is impossible to reverse the strategic missteps of the Afghanistan security assistance endeavor, this report captures lessons learned that can be applied to future such efforts, if they must be undertaken at all, as well as any enduring security assistance efforts, undertaken without U.S. troops, in Afghanistan.

1. SSA partnerships should be founded on a shared, responsive, but enduring long-term vision.

While unforeseen events will inevitably require adjustment to any SSA partnership, assistance relationships should be founded on an agreed upon long-term vision that can accommodate on-the-ground developments, while maintaining a firm strategic trajectory. Accordingly, objectives should be reasonably achievable through the limited means of SSA, and should be integrated into the broader policy aims of the U.S. and recipient governments.

2. SSA must be designed to fit local context and with local stakeholders at the decision-making table.

U.S. SSA understandably reflects American doctrine, tactics, institutions, and materiel. But SSA should be tailored for its recipients by taking into account their political, security, and military history, existing security architecture (both formal and informal), human capital, financial and technical wherewithal, and regional dynamics. This contextualization is only possible if local stakeholders are given a real seat at the table to voice their concerns and desires, which should be prioritized during decision-making. Assistance that is not sufficiently molded to local context risks undermining local investment in the enterprise, creating long-term dependencies, and posing serious risks to SSA sustainability.

3. The various agencies within the U.S. government must develop a shared understanding of what SSA is meant to achieve.

Conceptions of security cooperation vary across U.S. government agencies, with each having differing notions of what role SSA should play in U.S. foreign policy and what it is meant to achieve. Building capabilities, supporting interoperability, gaining political access and influence, and prioritizing the use of U.S. weapons, among other goals, are often listed as priorities. To maximize the effectiveness of SSA, the U.S.



A U.S. Soldier in the Kandahar province. Nov. 26, 2009. The U.S. Army/Flickr

government should develop a more cohesive interagency security cooperation doctrine with a shared set of operational definitions, objectives, and policies for SSA, and which integrates security assistance and assessment, monitoring, and evaluation (AM&E) within the broader foreign policy enterprise.

4. The U.S. should not provide assistance at any scale that it isn't able to account for or responsibly oversee. SSA should consider what amount a recipient nation is able to absorb and benefit from. Generally, larger amounts of assistance are best distributed over a prolonged timespan, to allow time to absorb, adapt, and integrate new methods of operation. Increasing resources too quickly is a clear path to fostering corruption and losing funds and equipment to those who would use both to their personal benefit.

5. Over-resourcing in SSA can create its own resource deficits. SSA especially at a large scale, poses unique challenges. In particular, as the sum of the investment increases, so do the ambitions for the enterprise, creating a chronic deficit between resources and expectations. Similarly, assistance dollars can fuel bureaucratic and staffing requirements that neither the donor nor recipient can accommodate. This deficit is especially acute when assistance aims to develop advanced security structures that are not locally sustainable.

6. SSA assessments must consider risks posed by local corruption, governance, and conflict. While practical assessments that judge absorptive capacity are important, they remain too technically focused. Current frameworks fail to account for important ways in which the aid economy can exacerbate corruption and distort power balances, particularly in fragile states where governance remains unsettled and in environments where specific social groups are overrepresented in a country's power structures. In these contexts, assistance can militarize local tensions and empower conflict entrepreneurs.

7. Direct U.S. participation in hostilities creates new sets of conditions, imperatives, and interests that are frequently incompatible with SSA objectives. Despite commonality in material, institutions, and subject matter, warfighting and SSA are two vastly different undertakings. When layered on top of one another, they can create dangerous contradictions in objectives, and in some cases, distort practice, strategy, and goals for an assistance enterprise. With the U.S. engaged in active combat in at least 14 countries, and perhaps more depending on terms of classification, it is essential for policymakers to create mechanisms that account for and, as necessary, de-conflict SSA with warfighting.

8. The division of responsibility for security sector assistance across the U.S. government creates a vacuum of leadership in the SSA enterprise. No one government agency or office is responsible for the entire SSA enterprise within the U.S. government. Instead, SSA policy and implementation is shared across different elements of the Departments of State and Defense and the Combatant Commands. In this environment, varying institutional perspectives are siloed, and viewpoints are often poorly reconciled. In particular, the power imbalance between State, which is formulating policy, and the Department of Defense, which is largely responsible for SSA implementation, can lead to prioritizing tactical goals at the expense of foreign policy priorities. Moreover, the division of responsibility for various elements of the enterprise undermines accountability, as various entities conceive of their obligations narrowly.

9. SSA efforts need a more robust, broadly conceived, and interdisciplinary Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation (AM&E) Regime. Current security assistance AM&E paradigms are squarely focused on technical components of SSA, designed with quantitative metrics for inputs and outputs in mind. But SSA is a complex enterprise that impacts and is impacted by the environment in which it is being implemented. Accordingly, the U.S. must develop new means of assessing SSA that take a holistic look at any given partnership, including a rigorous focus on gauging local context, with direct consequences for shaping SSA planning, execution, or the decision to pursue SSA at all.

10. THE SSA enterprise would benefit from a robust mechanism that encourages dissent and policy recalibration within the Departments of Defense and State. The SSA enterprise is structurally geared toward affirming the need for SSA and toward maintaining the status quo in SSA partnerships. A better mechanism for dissent and reevaluating policies would provide SSA professionals with the ability to raise red flags when SSA is poorly pursued or working at cross-purposes to broader foreign policy goals. A better mechanism for dissent should also encourage reform and permit dissenters to suggest when a SSA partnership is unsuitable in a given context. One way to achieve this would be to strengthen the roles that inspectors general such as SIGAR play throughout SSA efforts, from the very beginning, and to encourage personnel at every level to share their frank assessments and advice for improvement, to allow for better and earlier interventions.



President Biden delivers address about U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Apr. 12, 2021. Andrew Harnik-Pool/Getty Images

CONCLUSION

Looking Forward

The announced September withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Afghanistan leaves many questions unanswered and creates an ambiguity that must feel all too familiar to Afghans. Violence across the country remains widespread, with a spike in targeted assassinations. A string of tactical defeats for the Afghan security forces have created deep anxiety among Afghans as to the country's near future.

While the ANDSF remains a crucial component of Afghanistan's political and security landscape, Afghan security forces are not financially or technically capable of sustaining themselves without foreign assistance. The departure of U.S. troops and, perhaps more importantly, foreign contractors, will leave a wobbly force on even less sure footing. The United States will have to proceed carefully to balance its diplomatic commitments with the Taliban, its decision to withdraw troops, and its responsibility to the ANDSF that it has spent billions on and which has been structurally molded to be dependent on foreign assistance to function.

Ultimately, the uncertainty the ANDSF now faces is an indictment of America's security sector assistance and defense institution building enterprises in Afghanistan. After more than 20 years and \$90 billion in direct assistance, intelligence estimates still warn that the Taliban could control much of the country in just a few years following the departure of international forces.

Afghanistan's mission suffered from a variety of structural realities and strategic choices that offer important lessons not just for the future of the U.S. relationship with Kabul, but the security sector assistance enterprise as a whole.

This 20-year effort has exposed deep deficiencies in the way the United States conducts security assistance, particularly at a large scale and in an active conflict zone. After the troop withdrawal, there may be a temptation for policymakers to close the chapter on Afghanistan and simply look forward to America's next engagements. That would be a mistake. Contained within America's experience in Afghanistan are critical lessons for security assistance, which the United States can either remedy or repeat.

APPENDIX

Chronology of U.S. Security Assistance in Afghanistan

This section provides a brief overview of the U.S. security sector assistance in Afghanistan since 2001. A more detailed summary of the two-decade effort is beyond the scope of this report and would duplicate other histories gathered by organizations such as SIGAR, USIP, CNA, the RAND Corporation, and others, which have been instrumental in the drafting of this report.

Before the attacks of September 11, 2001, Afghanistan was an afterthought in U.S. national security thinking, and on the eve of 9/11, U.S. Central Command had no contingency plans in place for conventional operations in the country.⁶⁹ Al Qaeda's 9/11 attack changed that in an instant. In a matter of weeks, the United States would have troops on the ground and hundreds of planes in the air supporting Afghan forces to dislodge and defeat the Taliban, whose leadership had created a safe haven for Al Qaeda and other militants.

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But the desire for swift action narrowed America's goals. U.S. intelligence and defense planners were focused squarely on the immediate tactical objectives, with little thought as to the post-Taliban future of Afghanistan or its security sector. The effects of this would reverberate in the years that followed.

The American Invasion and the Scrimmage for Power: 2001-2002

Within days of the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. had prepared plans for an invasion of Afghanistan, with the aim of destroying Al Qaeda and overthrowing the Taliban.⁷⁰ Seeking to avoid the quagmire of the Soviet war in Afghanistan throughout the 1980s, the U.S. strategy sought to minimize the commitment of allied troops by providing intensive support to anti-Taliban militias.⁷¹

69. Ali Ahmad Jalali, *A Military History of Afghanistan: From the Great Game to the Global War on Terror 1800-2015* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), p. 457, https://search.lib.virginia.edu/sources/uva_library/items/u7049548.

70. Kenneth Katzman and Clayton Thomas, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy,” U.S. Library of Congress: Congressional Research Service, December 13, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf>.

71. Ali Ahmad Jalali, “Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces: Mission, Challenges and Sustainability,” United States Institute of Peace, May 2016, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2016/05/afghanistan-national-defense-and-security-forces>.



U.S. Marines raise the first American flag in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom. Nov. 26, 2001. MarineCorps NewYork/Flickr

The war strategy would take the form of an intensive advise, assist, and accompany mission, with U.S. forces working with local militias to dislodge the Taliban. The primary partner in this enterprise would be the Northern Alliance, a collection of Afghan political and armed factions dominated by ethnic Tajiks and supported by heavy U.S. airstrikes, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operators, and U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF).⁷²

The campaign began in earnest on October 7, with U.S. airstrikes targeting Taliban and Al Qaeda positions, as embedded SOF and CIA teams advanced on various fronts with Northern Alliance forces.⁷³ Within five weeks, anti-Taliban forces, principally the Northern Alliance, assisted by U.S. troops, retook Kabul. On December 9, the Taliban's leader, Mullah Umar, fled the country entirely. U.S. partner operations continued, but on May 1, 2003, U.S. officials declared an end to major combat operations.⁷⁴

From the outset, events on the ground far outpaced strategic post-conflict planning. The Bush administration's opposition to nation-building created political pressure for haste in extracting the U.S. from the conflict while minimizing the American commitment to reconstruction. A U.S. planning document at the time stated that the U.S. "should not commit to any post-Taliban military involvement, since the U.S. will be heavily engaged in anti-terror-

72. Kenneth Katzman and Clayton Thomas, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," U.S. Library of Congress: Congressional Research Service, December 13, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf>.

73. Ali Ahmad Jalali, *A Military History of Afghanistan: From the Great Game to the Global War on Terror 1800-2015* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), p. 459-466, https://search.lib.virginia.edu/sources/uva_library/items/u7049548.

74. Kenneth Katzman and Clayton Thomas, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," U.S. Library of Congress: Congressional Research Service, December 13, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf>.

ism efforts worldwide.”⁷⁵ As was described by the former Afghan Interior Minister, Ali Ahmad Jalali:

“The U.S.-led intervention was basically a military response to the 9/11 attacks, with no clear political vision for post-Taliban Afghanistan...all plans and strategic arrangements in support of their implementation had a military focus, with little attention to the post-conflict period.”⁷⁶

The same was true for post-Taliban security planning. In the wake of the Taliban’s collapse, various anti-Taliban factions rushed to compete for their share of postwar-spoils.⁷⁷ Despite international efforts to create a broad-based interim government, Afghan elites and regional actors fought for control of various territories, ministerial and security posts, and resources.⁷⁸

The deteriorating political situation was exacerbated by the U.S. focus on counterterrorism and its aversion to committing substantial resources to Afghanistan’s institutional development. The empowerment of militia commanders by the United States vis-a-vis partnered counterterrorism operations further undercut security sector development. Although the 2001 Bonn Agreement⁷⁹ specified that irregular forces would come under the command of the Interim Authority in Kabul, integrating these newly empowered militias into the Afghan government proved challenging, with personnel responding to their own factional leaders over official hierarchies.⁸⁰

Throughout this period, infighting among security elites dramatically destabilized the country. Still determined to avoid deploying large numbers of foreign troops, U.S. and coalition

75. Donald H. Rumsfeld, “Beyond ‘Nation-Building,’” *Washington Post*, September 25, 2003, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2003/09/25/beyond-nation-building/dc884ed9-f1e4-4ef8-b2e2-9812ae80e4ef/>. Ali Ahmad Jalali, *A Military History of Afghanistan: From the Great Game to the Global War on Terror 1800-2015* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), p. 484, https://search.lib.virginia.edu/sources/uva_library/items/u7049548.

76. Ali Ahmad Jalali, *A Military History of Afghanistan: From the Great Game to the Global War on Terror 1800-2015* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), p. 484, https://search.lib.virginia.edu/sources/uva_library/items/u7049548.

77. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, September 2017, p. 12, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf?mod=article_inline.

78. *Ibid.*

79. The Bonn Agreement was a set of agreements established in December 2001 to establish an interim authority in Afghanistan, see United Nations Security Council, “Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions (Bonn Agreement),” December 5, 2001, <https://peacemaker.un.org/afghanistan-bonnagreement2001>.

80. Ali Ahmad Jalali, “Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces: Mission, Challenges and Sustainability,” United States Institute of Peace, May 2016, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2016/05/afghanistan-national-defense-and-security-forces>.

planners finally concluded that “the development of an internationally trained and professional Afghan national security force could serve as a viable alternative to the expansion of international forces in Afghanistan.”⁸¹

Standing Up an Afghan Defense and Security Sector: 2002-2004

Standing up an Afghan defense and security sector was meant to serve two purposes: 1) to provide national security and defend against any enduring threats from Taliban and Al Qaeda remnants, and 2) to address the proliferation of militias across the country.⁸² By early 2002, there were approximately one million men serving in private Afghan militias. The Bonn Agreement called for integrating these irregular fighters into the regular army.⁸³

In 2002, the Group of Eight (G8) countries gathered in Geneva to plan the development of the Afghan security forces agreed on five lines of effort, each led by a different coalition partner—military reform led by the United States; police reform led by Germany; judicial reform led by Italy; counternarcotics led by the United Kingdom; and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration led by Japan.⁸⁴

Early U.S. plans in 2002 called for an Afghan National Army (ANA) of 62,000 troops with nearly 30,000 trained by April 2003.⁸⁵ These plans diverged from those envisioned by Afghan leaders, who believed the country needed a much larger force of 250,000 to address internal and external threats.⁸⁶ Ultimately, the American desire to minimize its obligations won

81. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, September 2017, p. 12, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf?mod=article_inline.

82. Terrence K. Kelly, Nora Bensahel, and Olga Olikier, *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2011), p. 17-18, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1066.pdf.

83. Terrence K. Kelly, Nora Bensahel, and Olga Olikier, *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2011), p. 17-18, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1066.pdf.

84. Mark Sedra, “Security first: Afghanistan’s security sector reform process,” *The Ploughshares Monitor* p. 2, 24(4), Winter 2003, https://ploughshares.ca/pl_publications/security-first-afghanistans-security-sector-reform-process/.

85. Terrence K. Kelly, Nora Bensahel, and Olga Olikier, *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2011), p. 21, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1066.pdf; Donald Rumsfeld, “U.S. Financial Commitment,” Memorandum to Secretary of State Colin Powell and Assistant to the President on National Security Affairs Condoleezza Rice, Rumsfeld Papers, April 8, 2002, p. 45.; Colin Powell, “U.S. Financial Commitment,” Memorandum to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Assistant to the President on National Security Affairs Condoleezza Rice, Rumsfeld Papers, April 16, 2002.

86. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, September 2017, p. 15, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf?mod=article_inline.

out. Convinced Afghanistan needed a small light-infantry force for internal security, the U.S. planned for the development of a single army corps that would allow for a U.S. withdrawal by 2004.⁸⁷ U.S. defense planners elected to model the ANA after the U.S. Army's light infantry forces, composed of civilian leaders, an officer corps, enlistees, and noncommissioned officers (NCOs).

Immediately, the plan presented doctrinal challenges, as the U.S.-style defense structures ran up against Afghanistan's historical defense models, which included heavy Soviet and Turkish influences.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, ANA training officially began in May 2002, initially led by U.S. SOF personnel.⁸⁹ Issues of retention, resourcing, and desertion quickly became apparent, as the U.S. and Afghans struggled to meet target force strength goals.⁹⁰

In 2003, the U.S. transferred training from SOF to its conventional forces under the newly created Task Force Phoenix. Task Force Phoenix was to serve as an accelerator for the ANA, expanding training and institution building up to the corps and ministerial level.⁹¹ By August 2003, the Afghan central corps was activated and able to provide security for an important January 2004 Jirga (tribal council) in Kabul that ratified the country's new constitution.

Meanwhile, Germany, the lead nation for police development, struggled to meet its benchmarks. Hampered by its focus on Kabul at the expense of the rest of the country, restricted by



U.S. Army Soldiers from Task Force Phoenix conduct a live-fire training with Afghan soldiers. Feb 12, 2008. U.S. Army Photo/Flickr

87. Ibid, 16.

88. Ibid, 17.

89. Terrence K. Kelly, Nora Bensahel, and Olga Oliker, *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2011), p. 24, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1066.pdf.

90. Ibid, 25-26.

91. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, September 2017, p. 19, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf?mod=article_inline.

national caveats, and bereft of a military component to aid its civilian policing enterprise, law enforcement was barely present beyond the capital. This dynamic empowered irregular security actors, who filled the void. Efforts to build an effective Ministry of Interior were almost non-existent.⁹²

The stunted development of the Afghan National Police (ANP) created fertile ground for its co-option by other Afghan elites, particularly Northern Alliance partisans.⁹³ Accordingly, public confidence in the police remained low. Concerned over the slow progress made by the ANP, in 2003 the U.S. initiated a training program focused on non-officer patrolmen to proceed in parallel to the German-led effort.⁹⁴



A Reconstituted Taliban and A Return to Conflict: 2004-2008

The Taliban's apparent defeat in 2002 would prove deceptive. From sanctuaries in Pakistan, the Taliban began to reconstitute, proliferating into its traditional Pashtun strongholds in the south and east of Afghanistan. Although the Taliban's re-emergence escaped the immediate attention of international security forces, by 2005 the insurgency's spread was obvious, security deteriorated, and attacks across the country spiked.

The erosion of security cast a spotlight on the slow progress of the ANA and ANP. In much of the country, the Taliban's advance met little resistance from central government forces. The slow pace of the security sector's

An Afghan National Police officer greets a U.S. Sergeant at an ANP observation post. Oct. 31, 2007. NATO Training Mission Afghanistan/DVIDS

92. Ibid, 26-30.

93. Amnesty International, "Afghanistan Police Reconstruction Essential for The Protection of Human Rights," March 12, 2003, Index number: ASA 11/003/2003, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/003/2003/en/>; Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, September 2017, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf?mod=article_inline.

94. Ibid, 31.

progress reflected, in part, a planning tempo based on peacetime conditions.⁹⁵ But with a powerful insurgency making inroads across the country, American defense planners changed course.

In 2004, the U.S. pivoted to focus on the rapid expansion of Afghan security forces, with plans to increase the ANA to four corps. Frustrated by the failures of internationally divided responsibility for security assistance, the U.S. officially took ownership for ANP development in 2005, which was folded into the newly created Combined Security and Transition Command Afghanistan (CSTC-A).⁹⁶ CTSC-A was given responsibility for country-wide security assistance, including supporting ministries and generating and developing forces.⁹⁷

Of immediate concern were the ANA and ANP's force size and training rates. With security for the 2004-2005 elections seen as a barometer for the ANA's and ANP's performance, the U.S. greatly expanded training to meet those security requirements.⁹⁸ By January 2004, training capacity was expanded to allow for the development of multiple simultaneous brigades. Defense planners reoriented the vision for the ANA from light infantry brigades to a more advanced combined arms force, including an indigenous air capability and special forces.⁹⁹ This rapid expansion of the ANA placed greater emphasis on embedded training teams to augment accelerated training cycles, straining U.S. staffing abilities.¹⁰⁰

The pace of ANP's development also increased, proceeding along parallel German and U.S.-led tracks focused on officers and patrolmen respectively—an effort that would eventually be led by the Department of Defense. Leaning heavily on the contractor DynCorp, ANP development became squarely focused on the production of non-officers to hold key population centers cleared by coalition and ANA forces. To supplement the ANP's lagging abilities

95. Terrence K. Kelly, Nora Bensahel, and Olga Oliker, *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2011), p. 17, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1066.pdf.

96. *Ibid.*, 37.

97. Department of Defense, "United States Plan for Sustaining the Afghanistan National Security Forces," Report to Congress, Washington D.C., June 2008, p. 6, https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/United_States_Plan_for_Sustaining_the_Afghanistan_National_Security_Forces_1231.pdf.

98. Terrence K. Kelly, Nora Bensahel, and Olga Oliker, *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2011), p. 32, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1066.pdf.

99. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan* September 2017, p. 40, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf?mod=article_inline.

100. Terrence K. Kelly, Nora Bensahel, and Olga Oliker, *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2011), p. 33-34, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1066.pdf.

and force strength, the U.S. and Afghan leadership created the Afghan Auxiliary Police, a highly localized community policing effort, with personnel selected by local leaders. Whatever the intentions, the formation quickly became a predatory force, with limited oversight and ambiguous loyalties to the central government.¹⁰¹

This strategic reorientation toward force expansion presented a number of challenges. First, the desire to rapidly expand the size of security forces led to an excessive focus on quantity of personnel over the quality of training. This, in turn, presented challenges in performance, professionalism, and corruption. Training regimes were shortened, and the ethnic balances of forces became more difficult to maintain.

Second, the doctrinal evolution toward a combined arms force created a vastly more complex ANA, with more sophisticated structural, logistical, and systemic support needs that could not be satisfied locally.¹⁰² Security personnel saw the impact in persistent equipment and other resource shortages.

To meet the expanded size and complexity of the force and address resourcing shortfalls, international funding grew substantially. In 2005, the U.S. created the Afghan Security Forces Fund (ASFF), a new budgetary vehicle that would serve as the principal means of funneling U.S. money to the ANDSF. By FY2007, U.S. security assistance to Afghanistan had risen from \$468 million in FY2003 to \$8.6 billion.¹⁰³

Increased funding in support of the ANDSF also led to greater efforts toward establishing improved assessment, monitoring, and evaluation (AM&E) regimes to gauge the effectiveness of investment in the security sector. The first significant iteration of this effort was the Capability Milestone rating system, which graded on a 1-4 scale, with CM-1 representing a unit able to conduct its primary function with minimal external assistance.

“THE DESIRE TO RAPIDLY EXPAND THE SIZE OF SECURITY FORCES LED TO AN EXCESSIVE FOCUS ON QUANTITY OF PERSONNEL OVER THE QUALITY OF TRAINING.”

101. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, September 2017, p. 62, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf?mod=article_inline.

102. Terrence K. Kelly, Nora Bensahel, and Olga Oliker, *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2011), p. 35, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1066.pdf; Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, September 2017, p. 39-49, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf?mod=article_inline.

103. Security Assistance Monitor. “Security Aid Pivot Table.” Washington, DC 2021, <https://securityassistance.org/security-sector-assistance/>.



Then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates addressing troops at Camp Leatherneck. Dec. 8, 2010. Lance Cpl. Shannon Yount/DVIDS

The Taliban Spreads, the U.S. Surges: 2009-2014

By the end of President Bush's final term, the situation in Afghanistan had deteriorated significantly. The new Obama administration quickly ordered a strategic review of U.S. Afghanistan policy, which included a multi-disciplinary "Commander's Assessment," led by the newly appointed commander of U.S. and ISAF forces, General Stanley McCrystal.

The assessment painted a damning picture of the U.S. war effort as well as the performance of the ANDSF. The assessment recommended a complete overhaul of the U.S. war effort toward a classic, population-centric, counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign, which would place particular emphasis on international partnerships with a dramatically expanded ANDSF.¹⁰⁴

The White House agreed to a surge of 30,000 U.S. troops and an expansion of the ANDSF to 325,000 personnel, an increase of nearly 50 percent from previous targets.¹⁰⁵ The coalition would aim to use international forces to reverse the Taliban's momentum, while simultaneously preparing the ANDSF to take over security responsibilities by 2011 under conditions they could reasonably manage.¹⁰⁶

104. Matthew C. Brand, General McCrystal's Strategic Assessment: Evaluating the Operating Environment in Afghanistan in the Summer of 2009 (Alabama: Air University Press, 2011), p. 2-15, https://media.defense.gov/2017/Jun/19/2001765050/-1/-1/0/AP_BRAND_MCCHRYSTALS_ASSESSMENT.PDF.

105. Matthew C. Brand, Commander's Initial Assessment: 30 August 2009 (Alabama: Air University Press, 2011), p. 1-1, 2-20, G-4 https://media.defense.gov/2017/Jun/19/2001765050/-1/-1/0/AP_BRAND_MCCHRYSTALS_ASSESSMENT.PDF; Matthew C. Brand, Commander's Initial Assessment: 30 August 2009 (Alabama: Air University Press, 2011), p. 1-1, 2-20, G-4 https://media.defense.gov/2017/Jun/19/2001765050/-1/-1/0/AP_BRAND_MCCHRYSTALS_ASSESSMENT.PDF.

106. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan, September 2017, p. 70, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf?mod=article_inline.

The surge vastly expanded the resources dedicated to the ANDSF as well as the ambitions for their rapid development. International advisors and military personnel tasked with building the capacity of the ANDSF poured into the country, with additional lines of effort targeting ministerial development. In parallel to the ANA, the Afghan Special Forces and Air Force made notable operational progress. Under the new ANA Special Operations Command ANA-SOC, the elite force grew to 12,525 commandos and 955 special forces soldiers and became the most well-regarded element of the ANDSF.

The new COIN strategy also elevated the role of the ANP, though the force continued to struggle. Its new centrality in the war effort diverted attention from the ANP's law enforcement function, creating an ANP more akin to a paramilitary force. The Afghan Local Police (ALP) officially formed in 2010, and the successor to the Afghan Auxiliary Police also saw mixed results, with many local police forces co-opted by local warlords and tribal elites, and exhibiting predatory behaviors.¹⁰⁷

The surge created an unfortunate paradox. The vast expansion in resourcing for the ANDSF's development effort consistently lagged behind the corresponding expansion in mission, scope, and ambitions. Rising levels of support created heightened expectations for the force, which ultimately outpaced staffing, funding, and international backing.



Illumination rounds fired during Operation Tora Arwa V in the Kandahar province. Aug. 1, 2009. The U.S. Army/Flickr

The increasing size of the ANA demanded more international trainers than the coalition was able to supply. Though funding and support grew, the influx required the development of new bureaucracies and combat enabling structures that exacerbated the dependency of the ANDSF of its international backers.

The widening gap between ambitions and realities were often obscured by ill-suited and shifting AM&E regimes. With political pressure mounting to see a return on investments in the ANDSF, assessment methodologies were routinely changed, resulting in structures that were vulnerable to confirmation bias, ill-suited to year-on-year analysis, and geared toward overly quantitative metrics. Outputs, rather than

107. Ibid, 102.

performance, dominated AM&E paradigms, which excluded appraisals of corruption, predatory behavior, and other subjective variables.¹⁰⁸

In 2011, President Karzai announced the first tranche of Afghan districts to begin the transition to Afghan-led security. The fifth and final tranche for transitions was announced in 2013. On December 28, 2014, the ISAF mission officially ended, succeeded by NATO's Resolute Support which would train, advise, and assist the ANDSF. Though the transition to Afghan-led security took place in stages, the handover of 2014 proceeded, regardless of the degree of transition any given Afghan district had achieved.¹⁰⁹ The Afghans were now in the lead.

A New Mission, a Struggling State, and a Resilient Insurgency: 2015-2016

By 2015, the U.S. and NATO had officially transitioned to Operation Freedom's Sentinel and Resolute Support respectively, both focused on the development of the ANDSF. With Afghans leading the war effort, coalition support would center at the corps and ministerial levels.¹¹⁰ Regional Train, Advise, and Assist Commands, each led by a coalition partner, partnered with Afghan forces on three levels:

"Level 1 advising is continuous, usually daily, and normally conducted by embedded advisors. Level 2 is less frequent, based on the proximity of the advisors and capability of the Afghans, and is intended to ensure continued development. Level 3 advising means that advisors are no longer co-located; expeditionary teams of advisors visit their Afghan counterparts to plan and coordinate operations and sustainment."¹¹¹

Strategically, U.S. and coalition partner advising shifted away from a tactical, combat-oriented enterprise toward ministerial advising, capacity building, sustainment, and professionalization.

108. Ibid., 84-85; Adam Mausner, *Reforming ANSF Metrics: Improving the CUAT System* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2010), p. 3, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/100811_ANSF.CUAT.reform.pdf; Gary Owen, "Paint It Pink: The US redefining ANA success," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, August 2012, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/international-engagement/paint-it-pink-the-us-redefining-ana-success/>.

109. Department of Defense, "Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan," Report to Congress. Washington D.C., July 2013, p. 4, https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/Section_1230_Report_July_2013.pdf.

110. Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," Report to Congress, Washington D.C., December 2016, p. 8, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2016/afghanistan-security-stability_201612.pdf.

111. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, September 2017, p. 110, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessons-learned/SIGAR-17-62-LL.pdf?mod=article_inline.

Despite the optimism of the transition and strategic reorientation toward organizational development, the situation on the battlefield remained grim. Almost immediately after the U.S. drawdown began, Kabul saw its territorial grip weaken. Though performance varied by region, the ANA suffered critical defeats, including the loss of key urban centers that required substantial foreign support to retake. Persistent battlefield setbacks threw into stark relief the ANDSF's enduring dependence on foreign combat enablers, particularly for air support.

The ANA Special Forces continued to outperform their conventional counterparts, supplanting the ANA as the go-to force to secure key population centers. Their overuse, however, raised serious concerns, both as a matter of doctrinal propriety and as a matter of force sustainment.



U.S. Staff Sgt. gives field artillery training to Afghan National Army soldiers in Nangarhar province. Nov. 1, 2012. U.S. Army/DVIDS

AM&E regimes continued to evolve, making it increasingly difficult to conduct year-on-year analyses of ANDSF performance, and assessments continued to overlook battlefield performance in favor of input metrics that obscured measurements of effectiveness. The problem was compounded by a decline in the coalition advisors below the corps level, minimizing visibility into the practical performance of the ANDSF.¹¹²

The ANP also continued to struggle. The force has been subject to increasing criticism for its predatory and criminal behavior, as well as its lack of law enforcement proficiency. Professionalization remained a secondary concern, as coalition partners sought to use the ANP as a frontline paramilitary force in the fight against insurgents. Their hybrid role proved a fertile breeding ground for corruption, which has led many to view them as a “net-detractor of security.”¹¹³

112. Ibid.

113. Sam Gollob and Michael E. O'Hanlon, “Afghanistan Index: Tracking variables of reconstruction and security in post-9/11 Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy at Brookings*, August 2020, p. 15, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FP_20200825_afganistan_index.pdf.

Across the board, attrition and casualty rates remained dangerously high, undermining readiness, morale, and performance. Though exact figures are difficult to determine, ANDSF casualties rose by an estimated 80 percent between 2014 and 2016.¹¹⁴

In the face of severe military setbacks and growing levels of violence across the country, and despite the U.S. determination to shrink its combat role, the situation on the ground obstructed the Obama administration's plans to transition the U.S. to an embassy-based presence with an eye towards a negotiated peace.¹¹⁵ Timelines for the transition were repeatedly delayed, and ultimately, the pledge to withdraw all U.S. forces from the country was deferred to the next administration. The U.S. troop presence would remain at 8,400 through 2016.



Then President Trump and President Ghani addressing U.S. troops at Bagram Airfield. Nov. 28, 2019. Trump White House Archived/Flickr

US-Taliban Talks, A Rapid Drawdown, and an Uncertain Future: 2016-Present

By the close of President Obama's second term, it was clear that an end to the war remained out of sight. The effort to radically improve the performance, capabilities and staying power of the ANDSF to allow a comprehensive U.S. drawdown had not come to fruition. And though U.S. troop levels had been reduced substantially from a peak of 90,000 in 2011 to 7,000 by the end of 2016, it was clear that the U.S. presence in Afghanistan would extend

114. Sam Gollob and Michael E. O'Hanlon, "Afghanistan Index: Tracking variables of reconstruction and security in post-9/11 Afghanistan," Foreign Policy at Brookings, August 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FP_20200825_afghanistan_index.pdf.

115. Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by President Obama and President Ghani of Afghanistan in Joint Press Conference," The White House, March 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/24/remarks-president-obama-and-president-ghani-afghanistan-joint-press-conf>.

into the tenure of a third president.¹¹⁶

President Trump campaigned on a promise to end the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan, and in the early days of his administration, his instincts remained wedded to a rapid draw-down.¹¹⁷ But by 2017, after exhaustive and reportedly fraught deliberations, the Trump administration presented its new strategy for Afghanistan, which included plans to deploy more U.S. troops to train Afghan forces as well as an effort to pressure the Taliban's regional backers.¹¹⁸

Though much of the substance of the president's strategy remained consistent with that of his predecessor, there was a significant departure in his deprioritization of governance and state-building.¹¹⁹ Instead, the priority would be taking back the military initiative from the Taliban, an effort that would require enduring support to the ANDSF at the operational level, but with less focus on issues of security governance, civil-military affairs, and security sector reform.¹²⁰

The new U.S. strategy coincided with Afghan President Ghani's four-year "ANDSF Road Map," a broad restructuring of the Afghan security sector to "increase the capabilities of the ANDSF, secure major population centers, and incentivize the Taliban insurgency to reconcile with the Afghan government."¹²¹ The effort included the sacking of a number of high-level officials seen as ineffective or corrupt, the doubling of the Afghan special forces, and ex-

116. Sam Gollob and Michael E. O'Hanlon, "Afghanistan Index: Tracking variables of reconstruction and security in post-9/11 Afghanistan," Foreign Policy at Brookings, August 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FP_20200825_afghanistan_index.pdf.

117. Jacob Pramuk, "What Trump said about Afghanistan before he became president," CNBC, August 21, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/21/what-trump-said-about-afghanistan-before-he-became-president.html>; Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Mark Landler, "Trump Outlines New Afghanistan War Strategy With Few Details," New York Times, August 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/world/asia/afghanistan-troops-trump.html>.

118. Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Mark Landler, "Trump Outlines New Afghanistan War Strategy With Few Details," New York Times, August 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/world/asia/afghanistan-troops-trump.html>; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "President Trump's Afghanistan Policy: Hopes and Pitfalls," Foreign Policy at Brookings, September 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/afghanistan_hopes_pitfalls.pdf.

119. Vanda Felbab-Brown, "President Trump's Afghanistan Policy: Hopes and Pitfalls," Foreign Policy at Brookings, September 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/afghanistan_hopes_pitfalls.pdf.

120. James Dobbins, "Trump's New Afghanistan Strategy: Governing from the Center?" The RAND Blog, August 22, 2017, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/08/trumps-new-afghanistan-strategy-governing-from-the.html>; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "President Trump's Afghanistan Policy: Hopes and Pitfalls," Foreign Policy at Brookings, September 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/afghanistan_hopes_pitfalls.pdf.

121. Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," Report to Congress, Washington D.C., December 2017, p. 1, <https://media.defense.gov/2017/Dec/15/2001856979/-1/-1/1/1225-REPORT-DEC-2017-FINAL-UNCLASS-BASE.PDF>; Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Quarterly Report to the U.S. Congress," July 2017, p.61 <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2017-07-30qr.pdf>.

panded investment in the Afghan Air Force.¹²² The roadmap also added the ANA-Territorial Force, a new local defense force meant to replace and improve upon the much decried Afghan Local Police.¹²³

Taken together, the Trump administration effort was aimed at pressuring the Taliban by expanding ANDSF offensive operations and focusing on population centers at the expense of rural Taliban strongholds, all supported by a more robust train, advise, and assist mission.¹²⁴ The strategy also called for an expansion of U.S. forces in the country, including the deployment of newly minted Security Force Assistance Brigades, a tailored Army unit with specially selected personnel designed to address the ad hoc, irregular nature of U.S. security assistance formations in the U.S. military.¹²⁵

Additionally, the U.S. AM&E regime underwent further changes. At this stage, the U.S. method for assessing the performance of the ANDSF had undergone so many iterations, it was nearly impossible to construct a holistic picture of the force's progress over time.¹²⁶ From 2017 forward, the principal tool for



Then President Trump and Gen. Mark A. Milley at Bagram Airfield. Nov. 28, 2019. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff/Flickr

122. Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," Report to Congress, Washington D.C., December 2018, p. 38, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Dec/20/2002075158/-1/-1/1/1225-REPORT-DECEMBER-2018.PDF>.

123. Brad Townsend, "The Development and Creation of the Afghanistan National Army Territorial Forces," *Military Review*, March 2019, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MA-2019/Townsend-ANA-TF.pdf>.

124. Department of Defense, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," Report to Congress, Washington D.C., December 2017, p. 3-4, <https://media.defense.gov/2017/Dec/15/2001856979/-1/-1/1/1225-REPORT-DEC-2017-FINAL-UNCLASS-BASE.PDF>; Lara Seligman, "One Year On, Little to Show for Trump's Afghanistan Strategy," *Foreign Policy*, August 23, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/23/one-year-on-little-to-show-for-trumps-afghanistan-strategy/>.

125. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Report to the United States Congress: Security," July 30, 2018, p. 78, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-07-30qr-section3-security.pdf>.

126. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Report to the United States Congress: Security," April 30, 2020, p. 73, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2020-04-30qr-section3-security.pdf>.

providing development metrics was based on the “Afghanistan Compact,” a set of reforms the Afghan government committed to, with specific milestones and objectives, which were linked to a Resolute Support task list with benchmarks for progress.¹²⁷

Despite the new strategy and expansion of support, the security situation in Afghanistan continued to deteriorate, with many indicators suggesting the Taliban was gaining the upper hand. Civilian casualties grew to some of their highest levels since the war began, as did casualties for the ANDSF.¹²⁸ Though official DOD figures were classified, estimates indicate that by 2019, districts under complete Afghan government control had reached a precarious low of 54 percent.¹²⁹ In what was described as an “eroding stalemate,” the Taliban was not only operating in geographically more space but consolidating control in their areas of operations.¹³⁰

“THE SECURITY SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN CONTINUED TO DETERIORATE, WITH MANY INDICATORS SUGGESTING THE TALIBAN WAS GAINING THE UPPER HAND.”

Whatever the practical impact of the new South Asia Strategy, President Trump was concerned with two key priorities. The first was to complete a diplomatic agreement with the Taliban to quickly draw down the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Though the administration boasted of its transition to a conditions-based and non-time-bound strategy, the president’s first instinct to cut loose from the conflict was driving policy.

Beginning in 2018, the Trump administration began the first public U.S. effort to negotiate a diplomatic agreement with Taliban leadership to end the U.S. presence in the country.¹³¹ Negotiations were turbulent. Talks

127. Department of Defense, “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan,” Report to Congress. Washington D.C., June 2019, p. 16, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/12/2002156816/-1/-1/1/ENHANCING-SECURITY-AND-STABILITY-IN-AFGHANISTAN.PDF>.

128. Sam Gollob and Michael E. O’Hanlon, “Afghanistan Index: Tracking variables of reconstruction and security in post-9/11 Afghanistan,” Foreign Policy at Brookings, August 2020, p. 15, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FP_20200825_afghanistan_index.pdf; Susannah George, “The past three months in Afghanistan have been the deadliest for civilians in a decade,” The Washington Post, October 17, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/past-three-months-in-afghanistan-have-been-the-deadliest-for-civilians-in-a-decade/2019/10/17/09bf904e-f054-11e9-bb7e-d2026ee0c199_story.html.

129. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, “Quarterly Report to the U.S. Congress,” January, 2019, p. 70, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2019-01-30qr.pdf>.

130. United Nations Secretary-General, “Special report on the strategic review of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan: Report of the Secretary-General,” August 10, 2017, p. 4, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1299019?ln=en#record-files-collapse-header>.

131. International Crisis Group, “Taking Stock of the Taliban’s Perspectives on Peace,” Asia Report N°311, August 11, 2020, p. 1, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/311-taking-stock-of-taliban-perspectives.pdf>.

held in Doha, Qatar between Taliban and American representatives took more than 18 months and frequently stumbled.¹³² Nevertheless, on February 29, 2020, the U.S.-Taliban “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan” was signed by the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad, and the Taliban’s Political Deputy and Head of the Political Office, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.¹³³

At its core, the accord exchanges a promise from the Taliban to prevent armed groups from using Afghanistan as a base for acts against the United States for a promise that foreign forces will be withdrawn from the country.¹³⁴ On the same day, the U.S. also signed the U.S.-Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Declaration, an agreement between Washington, NATO, and the government in Kabul laying out four objectives for lasting peace in the country. The agreement re-affirmed the U.S. commitment to support the Afghan security forces while laying out a tentative timeline for the withdrawal of all U.S. forces, subject to the Taliban’s fulfillment of its own diplomatic pledges.¹³⁵

For a president who was effectively at odds with his national security team on remaining in Afghanistan at all, the accord offered a political opportunity to begin drawing down U.S. forces.¹³⁶ Despite touting the conditions-based nature of the U.S. pledge to remove troops from the country, the Trump administration quickly accelerated the withdrawal amidst rising levels of violence, cutting U.S. troop levels from approximately 12,000 in February to 2,500 by the end of 2020.¹³⁷

132. Peter Baker, Mujib Mashal and Michael Crowley, “How Trump’s Plan to Secretly Meet with the Taliban Came Together, and Fell Apart,” *New York Times*, February 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/08/world/asia/afghanistan-trump-camp-david-taliban.html>; Crisis Group Asia Briefing, “Getting the Afghanistan Peace Process Back on Track,” International Crisis Group, no. 159 (October 2019), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/b159-getting-afghanistan-peace-process-back-track>; Center for Preventive Action, “What to Know About the Afghan Peace Negotiations,” Council on Foreign Relations, September 11, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/article/what-know-about-afghan-peace-negotiations>.

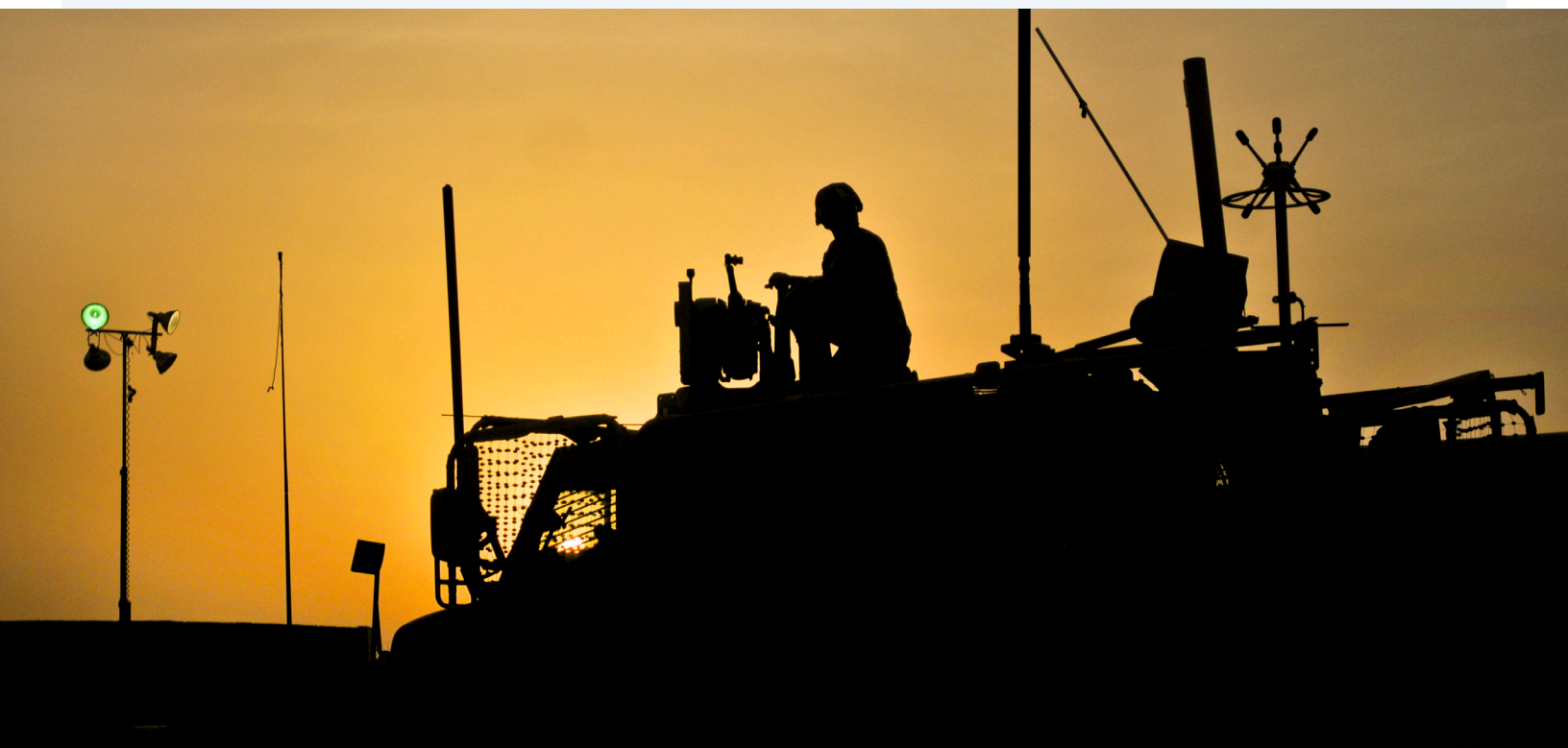
133. Center for Preventive Action, “What to Know About the Afghan Peace Negotiations,” Council on Foreign Relations, September 11, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/article/what-know-about-afghan-peace-negotiations>.

134. Lindsay Maizland, “U.S.-Taliban Peace Deal: What to Know,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 2, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-taliban-peace-deal-agreement-afghanistan-war>.

135. United States Department of State, “Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,” February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>.

136. Lara Seligman, Elias Groll, and Robbie Gramer, “Trump’s National Security Team Splinters Over Taliban Meeting,” *Foreign Policy*, September 9, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/09/esper-pompeo-bolton-trumps-national-security-team-splinters-over-taliban-meeting-peace-talks-details-afghanistan-pompeo-bolton-state-department-national-security-council-pentagon/>.

137. Sune E. Rasmussen and Ehsanullah Amiri, “Afghanistan Braces for Worst as U.S. Troop Withdrawal Accelerates,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 19, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/afghanistan-braces-for-worst-as-u-s-troop-withdrawal-accelerates-11605799305>.



U.S. Army members conduct an equipment check at Kandahar Airfield. July 30, 2013. The U.S. Army/Flickr

For the ANDSF, the reduced U.S. force presence could pose a number of operational challenges. Practically speaking, the drawdown could undercut the train, advise, and assist mission, as well as compromise some of the essential combat enabling support that the Afghans continue to depend on the United States to provide, including logistical, medical, and sustainment assistance.¹³⁸ Some experts have warned that these losses could prove crippling to the ANDSF.¹³⁹ But many others have concluded that after 20 years, it's time for the United States to finally cut its losses and return home. That latter view won out when on April 14, President Biden announced the United States would withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021.

**“BUT MANY OTHERS
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138. Anthony H Cordesman, “Judging the Impact of U.S. Force Reductions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 16, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/judging-impact-us-force-reductions-afghanistan-iraq-and-syria>; Scott Smith, “Scott Smith on U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” United States Institute of Peace, December 3, 2020, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/12/scott-smith-us-troop-withdrawal-afghanistan>.

139. Anthony H Cordesman, “Judging the Impact of U.S. Force Reductions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 16, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/judging-impact-us-force-reductions-afghanistan-iraq-and-syria>.

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