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AFGHANISTAN DID NOT HAVE TO TURN OUT THIS WAY

If we are to sustain our position as the leader of the Western world, we must understand why one of our signature campaigns resulted in such frustration.

By David Petraeus*

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A YEAR AFTER the chaotic scenes at Kabul airport, the outcome of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan is heartbreaking and tragic for many Afghans and devastating for their country. The Afghan government that fell, leading to the return of the Taliban, was maddeningly imperfect, full of frustrating shortcomings, and, in various respects, corrupt. Yet it was also an ally in America's effort to combat Islamist extremists in Afghanistan and the region, it celebrated many of the freedoms we cherish, and it wanted to ensure them for the long-suffering Afghan people. It was certainly preferable to what replaced it.

Recent decisions by the Taliban, particularly its treatment of women and girls, confirm the trajectory of a regime that seems intent on returning Afghanistan to an ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam. It will be incapable of reviving the Afghan economy, which has collapsed since Western forces withdrew. Although the Kabul strike that killed the al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri was a tremendous achievement by our intelligence and counterterrorism communities, Zawahiri's very presence in Kabul demonstrated that the Taliban is still willing to provide sanctuary to Islamist extremists. In short, a country of nearly 40 million people—individuals whom we sought to help for two decades—has been condemned to a future of repression and privation and likely will be an incubator for Islamist extremism in the years ahead.

The fact and manner of America's departure also enabled our adversaries to claim that the United States is not a dependable partner and is instead a great power in decline. In an era in which deterrence is of growing importance, that is not trivial (though our efforts to support Ukraine following Russia's invasion show that the U.S. can still lead effectively when it seeks to do so). Nor is it trivial that we left behind hundreds of thousands of Afghans who shared risk and hardship with our soldiers, diplomats, and development workers, and whose lives are now endangered, along with those of their family members.

* Hinweis: Der Artikel wurde von US-General a. D. David H. Petraeus in der Zeitschrift „The Atlantic" veröffentlicht und der Enquete-Kommission zur Verfügung gestellt; die vorliegende Kommissionsdrucksache enthält den Originaltext ohne Bilder. Der Artikel mit Bildern kann über: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/08/us-withdrawal-afghanistan-strategy-shortcomings/670980/ aufgerufen werden.

It did not have to turn out this way. I do not mean simply that there were reasonable alternatives to withdrawal that were not adequately considered, alternatives that would have led to better results than what we see today—though there were, and they would have.

Rather, I mean that it did not have to be this way at all; that despite the selfless, courageous, and professional service of our military and civilian elements, and also of our coalition partners—as well as that of innumerable great Afghans—we underachieved in Afghanistan. In fact, across our 20 years there, we made significant mistakes and fell short over and over again. Had we avoided, or corrected, enough of our missteps along the way, the options for our continued commitment to Afghanistan would have been more attractive to successive administrations in Washington—and might have precluded withdrawal entirely. Afghanistan was not going to transform into a prosperous, thriving, liberal democracy in the foreseeable future. But its prospects certainly were brighter than they are today. Moreover, as a result of our intervention in 2001, we had a responsibility to continue to help it along that path, however long it took.

What follows is not an exercise in relitigation or finger-pointing (though, inevitably, there will be some of that). Neither is it about absolving myself. I was as much a part of our efforts, in the middle years at least, as anyone else.

Instead, I want to contribute to an effort to learn from our experience in Afghanistan. Faced with a revanchist Russia, a more assertive China, an aggressive Iran, a dangerous North Korea, and Islamist extremists in various places around the world, more and more of our allies and partners look to us for resolve, a commitment to fight aggression and terrorism, and support of the democratic values we hold dear. We can provide the leadership needed only if we learn from our past endeavors.

We were right to invade Afghanistan when we did. Eliminating the sanctuary in which al-Qaeda planned the 9/11 attacks was essential to our national security, and toppling the Taliban showed our enemies that we would not tolerate those who provided a haven for terrorists who targeted our country and killed our countrymen. Our subsequent efforts also proved that we believed in the promise of freedom and democracy, and that those values are universal, however difficult it may have been to implement them in the shadow of the Hindu Kush.

But even as we acknowledge the good work that we did in Afghanistan, and recognize the sacrifice that it entailed, we must accept as well the shortcomings of our campaign there and appreciate what we got wrong, for how long, and at what cost. Ultimately, if we are to sustain our position as the leader of the Western world, we must understand why one of our signature campaigns resulted in such unending frustration.

OUR FOUNDATIONAL MISTAKE was our lack of commitment. In essence, we never adopted a sufficient, consistent, overarching approach that we stuck with from administration to administration, or even within individual administrations.

We were reluctant even at the outset of the intervention in Afghanistan, in late 2001, to establish a substantial military headquarters on the ground. And even after we did so the following year, we quickly shifted focus to Iraq. By the time attention and resources were once again truly devoted to Afghanistan, some eight years after the initial invasion, we had missed an opportunity to take advantage of a protracted period of relatively little violence in Afghanistan, during which time the Taliban and other insurgent elements regrouped in

Pakistan and then Afghanistan, and during which we could have made considerably greater strides in developing Afghan forces and institutions than we did.

As Admiral Mike Mullen often observed after becoming Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2007, "In Iraq, we do what we must; in Afghanistan, we do what we can." Frankly, "what we can" was never remotely enough. In fact, when I conducted an assessment of the situation in Afghanistan at Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's request in September 2005, I was struck by how far behind Iraq the efforts in Afghanistan already were, even though we had toppled the Taliban regime more than 15 months prior to our invasion of Iraq.

After Barack Obama took office and thoroughly reviewed the situation in Afghanistan, we did finally get the inputs roughly right for the first time, though even when the president announced a buildup of forces, he also outlined when the drawdown would begin. Regardless, by late 2010, we had finally established the right big ideas and overarching strategy; deployed reasonably sufficient forces to halt and roll back the Taliban's momentum; increased civilian capacity to complement our military efforts; established the right organizational structures; made much-needed adjustments to the push to train Afghan forces; developed a structured program to transition select Afghan districts to Afghan control; commenced an organized effort to reconcile with the Taliban rank and file while negotiations were pursued with the Taliban leadership; and took on the issues of civilian casualties, corruption, and cultivation of illegal narcotics, among other problems.

Unfortunately, this period lasted less than a year. In June 2011, the White House released the details of the drawdown in Afghanistan that the president had previously outlined would begin that summer. As it became clear that we could not deliver a knockout blow to the Taliban and other insurgent and extremist groups, we decided that withdrawal was preferable to a lengthy, frustrating commitment. Basically, we reverted to what became our pattern in Afghanistan: not long-term nation building, but repeated exit seeking, even though nation building did continue. (And, here, for those who might contend that we shouldn't have engaged in nation building, I would ask, once you have intervened as we did, how else do you help build the forces and capabilities that allow you to hand off crucial tasks—such as denying sanctuary to terrorists, securing the population and infrastructure, and running the country and its myriad institutions? Nation building was not just unavoidable; it was essential.)

Thus, when we recognized that we couldn't "win" the war, we did not even seriously consider that we might just "manage" it. In fact, some senior officials, including me, had cautioned that we would not be able to do in Afghanistan what we had done in Iraq—that though we might be able to drive violence down, we would not be able to "flip" the country, as we had during the surge in Iraq, and provide it a whole new beginning. The conditions and context were too different and too challenging.

To be sure, managing the situation would have required a sustained, generational commitment, one that would have continued to be frustrating and inevitably less than ideal; nonetheless, it would have been markedly better than leaving the country and its people to the Taliban and its insurgent partners, as should be obvious now. And, because of improvements in the use of technologies such as drones and precision munitions, as well as keeping U.S. forces in "advise, assist, and enabling" roles rather than on the front lines, it could have been sustainable in terms of the expenditure of blood and treasure.

The lack of sufficient commitment over the years had innumerable knock-on effects. Having leaders of successive U.S. administrations of both parties repeatedly stating that we wanted to leave, often regardless of the conditions on the ground, undermined our negotiating position with the Taliban and had a corrosive impact on our relations with our Afghan partners, our coalition allies, and the countries in the region, especially Pakistan. However understandable the publicly stated desires to draw down were, the negative implications of them were substantial and pernicious.

Moreover, the ultimate peace deal that we reached with the Taliban in 2020 that committed the U.S. to withdrawal the following year, which we negotiated without the elected Afghan government at the table, has to rank among the worst diplomatic agreements to which the U.S. has ever been a party. We acquiesced to Taliban demands because the resulting agreement gave us, in the narrowest sense possible, what we wanted: a defined timeline for our departure and a Taliban promise not to attack our forces (which was already quite difficult to do as, by that point, American soldiers were seldom on the front lines) in the interim. Of course, our enemies knew we wanted to leave, because our leaders had repeatedly expressed that desire. And knowing that, the Taliban realized they had to give up little of value in return. In fact, to induce the Taliban to agree to what they wanted—our departure—we forced the Afghan government to release more than 5,000 Taliban detainees, many of whom quickly rejoined the Taliban's ranks and helped enable the offensive that toppled the Afghan government after our forces withdrew. The timeline that had the U.S. withdrawing during the height of the fighting season was a major mistake, as well.

Throughout, but particularly in the final few years of our involvement in Afghanistan, we also repeatedly failed to appreciate the damaging effects of our stated desire to leave on the psyche of Afghan political and military leaders and those in the rank and file. After all, why should they truly partner with and invest in the solutions we promoted if we were leaving soon anyway? Given our lack of appreciation of the effect of our rhetoric and our actions, we thus failed to anticipate that Afghan forces—who until then had generally fought bravely, and had sustained battlefield losses that were some 26 times those sustained by American troops—could suffer a collapse in the face of simultaneous Taliban offensives around the country when it became clear to those forces that no one was coming to the rescue.

In the end, the outcome came down to a lack of American strategic patience, evident right up to our final moments there—when instead of withdrawing, we could have adopted an approach that kept U.S. troops on the ground, enabled by an armada of drones and coalition forces already deployed there from countries that broadly wanted to stay, as well as the crucial contractors needed for training and maintenance.

In essence, then, from the beginning through to the end—but especially at the end—American commitment was lacking.

WE ALSO CLEARLY fell short when it came to the use of resources. Not only did we not devote enough of our own capabilities for a sufficient period of time; we also improperly allocated some of what we had, and frequently failed to appreciate, or provide, what our Afghan partners actually needed.

As I noted earlier, it took nine years for us to finally deploy roughly the level of resources—military, civilian, and financial—needed in Afghanistan, and we kept the military component of those resources in place for only eight months or so before beginning to draw down.

Beyond that, we sometimes failed to use the resources that we had as effectively as we might have, throwing money at problems and trying to do too much too quickly. I was certainly party to this. To some degree, this was because we knew that we were always on a path to withdrawal and thus needed to move quickly while we had the funding and other resources needed. Yet all of this unquestionably contributed to corruption (which we tried to identify and combat, though it was maddeningly difficult to root out), and the development of an unsustainable wartime economy. It also led us to rush to complete projects using Western materials and methods rather than Afghan alternatives that might have taken longer to finish but would have been more viable over time.

We also did not always deliver what the Afghan military needed or should have had. Instead, we gave them what we thought they needed and, under pressure from the U.S. Congress, we sought to buy American, even when U.S. systems, such as our helicopters, were too complex for the Afghans to maintain. Had we helped the Afghan military along a path where it acquired less complex (typically non-American) equipment, we might have built it into a more sustainable fighting force, but one that remained nearly as capable and would have been more able to operate independently of us. In particular, we made the Afghan security forces heavily reliant on U.S.-provided air assets that were more technically complex than the Afghans could maintain without substantial help from Western contractors, who had to leave once our forces departed. Ironically, the Afghans might have been able to carry on without U.S. and coalition forces, but they could not do without the well over 15,000 contractors who helped keep their air fleet and other U.S.-provided systems operational. (For those who suggest "We should have made the Afghans more like the insurgents," it is important to remember that the Afghans were, by necessity, the *counter*insurgents and had to defend population centers and infrastructure, not just operate at a time and place of their choosing, as the insurgents did.)

In the Afghan national-defense construct, the air force and commando reserves were the crucial elements. Afghanistan is a large, very mountainous country with limited road infrastructure, so aerial capabilities were essential to transport reinforcements and provide medical evacuation, emergency resupply, and close air support for forces fighting on the ground. But we need not have forced U.S. helicopters, in particular, on them, and instead should have helped them buy or maintain more of the refurbished Soviet and Russian systems that they were experienced with, and that were much easier to maintain and keep operationally ready. Indeed, that is what I recommended continuing to provide when I was the commander in Afghanistan.

Given the centrality of the Afghan reserves and the air assets needed to transport them to areas under attack, the collapse of the Afghan forces should not have been a complete surprise. In fact, I publicly noted at least a month prior to the withdrawal that I feared a psychological collapse of the Afghan forces if they knew that reinforcements and air support were not coming. (The failure of government leaders in Kabul to design and implement a realistic defense plan and then provide the kind of energy, example, direction, and inspiration that President Volodymyr Zelensky and his ministers have provided in Ukraine was a major factor as well.) Hence, the inability of the Afghans to maintain the sophisticated U.S. helicopters we forced upon them to help build up their military in no small part contributed to the collapse of that very military.

COMPOUNDING THESE two issues—the lack of strategic resolve and a failure to commit and properly allocate resources—was the fact that we often lacked sufficient understanding of the local and regional context with which we were dealing, and were unable to deal with certain aspects of that context even when we did clearly grasp them.

At the highest levels, at the outset, we saddled Afghanistan with governing structures and principles that gave more power to the central government than should have been the case. We also missed opportunities to incorporate reconcilable elements of the Taliban in the early years of our intervention. Finding the right balance between Kabul and Afghanistan's provinces and districts has been a difficult endeavor throughout Afghan history, but my sense was that we did not get it sufficiently right, particularly in our early years there.

We also undermined the effectiveness of Afghan leaders at various levels by working around them, rather than empowering them, and by conducting military or civilian programs that did not have their full buy-in, either because we did not trust them or because we did not think them capable of assisting. And despite considerable efforts to avoid mistakes in our military operations, we inevitably took actions that resulted in civilian casualties and made other errors that strained relationships with our Afghan partners. Indeed, some of our operations tragically created more enemies than they took off the battlefield, despite increasing emphasis over the years on avoiding such outcomes, and such incidents put undue pressure on Afghan leaders.

Of enormous importance, as well, is that we repeatedly failed to persuade or compel Pakistan to eliminate the sanctuaries on its soil established by the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and other extremist and insurgent networks that carried out campaigns and attacks in Afghanistan. We were also never able to sufficiently disrupt or degrade those sanctuaries with unilateral operations, because of Pakistan's limits on our activities.

In fact, as I reflect on the myriad challenges of Afghanistan, the sanctuaries in Pakistan were the most important and most vexing of the many differences between our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the most crippling aspect of the context in which we and our coalition allies and Afghan partners operated. That difference, more than all of the others, was likely the one that ultimately meant that we could not achieve in Afghanistan what we had accomplished in Iraq during the surge and the years immediately following it.

Here, too, our public statements about wanting and intending to leave Afghanistan likely undermined our efforts. The Pakistanis sensed that, at some point, the U.S. would depart Afghanistan, whether or not the conditions warranted such action, and so Pakistani leaders did not want to antagonize the groups that would likely end up ruling at least part, if not all, of Afghanistan. Once again, then, we return to the issue of inadequate strategic patience.

THERE ARE PLENTY of other reasons for why we ultimately underachieved in Afghanistan. There were overly rosy assessments of the situation in the country at various junctures, especially in the years prior to our ultimate withdrawal, which, set against the violence that followed, undermined the confidence our leaders and citizens had in our ability to achieve our objectives. There were also, of course, many failures of the Afghan government itself, some of them incredibly frustrating episodes involving government formation, major malfeasance by immediate family members of top government leaders, and self-inflicted political crises that sapped support in Kabul and in Washington, not to mention throughout Afghanistan. Finally, there was the seemingly endemic corruption that, over time, led many Afghans to be

disillusioned by promises made by their leaders. Those issues pose lingering questions about whether we could have, and should have, done more to rectify those shortcomings—or whether they were inescapable and damaging features of the overall endeavor.

At the end of the day, however, the three issues I have described—our lack of strategic resolve, our unwillingness to commit the resources required and to allocate properly the resources we had, and our failure to appreciate fully and deal with adequately the country and region in which we were operating—are what precluded achieving a better situation.

We very much need to learn from what transpired in America's longest war. Though we may understandably shrink from such ambitious endeavors again, there are numerous situations in which these lessons will be of value. Irregular warfare in various forms has certainly not disappeared from the world, nor have the ambitions of autocrats, such as Vladimir Putin, who have proved they will intervene in disputes well beyond their borders or invade countries that aspire to align with the West, as many Afghans certainly wished to do. Beyond that, one clear lesson of the past 20 years—and of recent weeks, given the operation that brought Zawahiri to justice, as well as Islamic State attacks in Afghanistan—should be that Islamist extremists will seek to exploit ungoverned, or inadequately governed, spaces, and that we need to keep pressure on them, albeit as efficiently and economically as possible.

In the case of Afghanistan, sadly, what is likely to transpire looks to be exceedingly dire, and the situation there will likely continue to be a significant concern for America. In fact, it will at the very least require continued military, diplomatic, development, intelligence, financial, and humanitarian resources and attention so that Islamist extremists are not able to reestablish sanctuaries—but also so that Afghans do not experience widespread starvation and so that refugees from Afghanistan do not become the kind of problem for our regional partners and European allies that Syrian refugees became in the previous decade. Beyond that, we also still need to meet the moral obligation we have to Afghans we left behind, in particular the Afghans who earned the right to migrate to America with their families in return for their service alongside our men and women in uniform as battlefield interpreters.

THE DESIRE OF MULTIPLE U.S. PRESIDENTS of both parties to end endless wars and focus on nation building at home rather than abroad is more than understandable, especially to those like me who served in those wars and know firsthand the costs and sacrifices of them.

The problem is that it is not clear that our withdrawal from Afghanistan has ended the endless war there, or even ended our involvement in it. And there is nothing to say we won't get drawn back in somehow. As my exceptional colleague Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who led our diplomatic missions in Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, among others, used to observe, "You can leave the movie theater, but the movie continues to roll."