

House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Hearing on “Afghanistan 2001-2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies – Part II”

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Statement of Ambassador Douglas E. Lute  
Former United States Ambassador to NATO  
Lieutenant General, U.S. Army, Retired

Chairman, Ranking Member, members of the committee: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss this important topic. In this brief statement I will offer some thoughts on context as your committee examines the war in Afghanistan and outline several lessons that I take away from U.S. involvement.

Context. In the face of the tragic events of recent weeks – the collapse of the Afghan government, the evacuation that followed, including the suicide attack at the Kabul airport that killed 13 Americans and over 150 Afghan civilians – it would be natural to focus on the near-term and ask how our efforts came to this end. I believe, however, a more powerful, more useful assessment would entail a deeper and broader view. This defeat in Afghanistan did not happen in 20 days or 20 weeks, but rather was the cumulative effect of 20 years. Despite all our efforts, all the sacrifices of our Nation, our NATO allies and partners, and most significantly the Afghan people, we were unable to build an Afghan state that was self-sustainable and able to win legitimacy among the Afghan people. We need to understand why.

Also, there may be a tendency to confine this assessment narrowly, only to Afghanistan, itself. The full story, however, includes a much broader picture: the role of regional players, especially Pakistan; the capabilities and mindset resident in our military, intelligence community, the State Department and others, as well as our ability to integrate these parts into a coherent whole; and the policy-making processes across four presidential administrations here in Washington.

Only such a deep and broad examination will render a full understanding of how our involvement in Afghanistan ended as it did.

Lessons. Many lessons will emerge from the war in Afghanistan. Today, I offer four that have to do with forming and executing strategy. I define strategy as the alignment of ends, ways and means over time. That is, the alignment of what we aim to achieve, our goals, with how we intend to achieve these, our methods, and finally the resources we assemble to do the work. If there are disconnects or gaps among these three elements, then we do not have an effective strategy.

First, when setting our national goals, we must have a realistic picture of what is possible in the specific setting. A deep understanding of the setting must be grounded in facts, not emotions, hope or aspirations. We should apply a healthy dose of humility as to what is possible in places as complex and foreign as Afghanistan. In 2001 when we initially intervened, Afghanistan was a failed state -- the fourth poorest country in the world, no state institutions, deeply fragmented politically, largely isolated from the modern world. Setting lofty, ambitious goals to build a state with a strong central government in such a setting may have been beyond our capabilities from the outset in 2001-2.

Second, once we set realistic goals, we must assemble the resources required. For the first seven or eight years of our experience in Afghanistan we under-resourced the effort, especially as we prioritized the war in Iraq beginning in 2003. During the same period, the Taliban regrouped and mounted a strong insurgency against the government and our presence. As years passed, this gap between our goals and our resources persisted and significantly decreased our prospects for success.

Third, among the resources we did commit to Afghanistan, we over-relied on military means, often providing too few or discounting the importance of political, diplomatic and development resources. We seldom achieved a balanced "whole of government" approach. Yet in the end, the collapse in Afghanistan was as much -- if not more -- a political collapse as military.

Fourth and finally, we should remember and value the contributions of others. Our NATO allies invoked Article 5, the collective defense clause of the NATO Treaty, on the day after 9-11, then stayed with us for 20 years on the battlefield, losing over 1000 killed in action. Important resources came the United Nations, the European Union, the World Bank, the IMF and countless non-governmental organizations. We are the most powerful country in the world, but we cannot take on and sustain interventions like Afghanistan alone. The lesson is clear: force cannot do all that needs doing, and all that needs doing cannot be done alone.

One final point on lessons. There is a significant difference between lessons and lessons learned. It is important to define the lessons, as this committee is undertaking with hearings such as today. It is even more significant to learn those lessons by way of adapting doctrine, processes, organizational structures, and budgets. Only then will we honor fully the sacrifices of many in Afghanistan over the past 20 years.