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A Failure to Plan: Examining the Biden Administration's Preparation for the Afghanistan Withdrawal

Afghanistan, Iraq, and Vietnam. One failure is a horrible accident; two failures are a tragic coincidence; three failures are a disturbing trend that shows the U.S. government is not learning from experience.

As I discuss in *Zero-Sum Victory: What We're Getting Wrong About War*, American troops fought valiantly in each war, but chronic policy and strategy errors squandered their service and sacrifices. Knowing these errors is the first step in fixing them.

Failing to address these mistakes while hoping for better outcomes in future wars is a dereliction of duty. Fortunately, the U.S. government can make low-cost, high-payoff reforms to reduce the risk that future wars spiral into disaster.

Three Immediate Causes of the Collapse

The result of these chronic failures in Afghanistan was the collapse of the Afghan government and a Taliban return to power that, among other problems, put girls out of school, banished women from the workplace, and increased threats to American interests.

I want to highlight three immediate causes precipitating the Afghan government's collapse following the Doha agreement with the Taliban and American withdrawal.

First, the Afghan government failed to gain the buy-in of the Afghan people. Instead of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, the Afghan government self-organized into a kleptocracy. Government offices were sold, often for vast sums, to the highest bidder in exchange for the license to recoup the money and turn a profit.

As Sarah Chayes points out, Afghan officials engaged in actions such as land theft, kidnapping for ransom, participation in poppy and other black-market activities, extortion,

and looting U.S. and international taxpayer-funded donations. Afghan military and police officials siphoned the pay of so-called ghost soldiers and sold their soldiers' food, fuel, and ammunition.

Afghan officials manipulated American and other military partners into targeting their personal and political rivals by providing false intelligence.

These actions by Afghan officials pushed people into the arms of the Taliban and other insurgents who were killing American troops. By August 2021, many Afghans saw the Taliban as the lesser of two evils.

Second, the United States and Afghan governments grew complacent while the Taliban innovated. Through successive administrations, the U.S. government expected that military pressure on the Taliban, plus building the Afghan government's capacity, plus diplomatic pressure on Pakistan would equal victory. The Afghan government, meanwhile, expected that the United States would stay forever, insulating them from accountability.

For a time, these approaches prevented the Taliban from overthrowing the Afghan government but never got us closer to a favorable and durable outcome.

For their part, the Taliban innovated militarily, politically, and diplomatically. Instead of attacking in massed-formations, they used guerilla tactics, roadside bombs, and insider attacks. Politically they emphasized anti-corruption and swift and impartial justice; they instituted local taxation, issued a code of conduct, and started holding officials accountable for their behavior. Diplomatically, the Taliban reached out to many countries, including the United States, to persuade them that cooperation was possible.

The Taliban's innovations gave them the upper hand over the Afghan government and may have convinced international officials that the Taliban had turned over a new leaf making it safe to strike a deal with them without any testing or accountability.

Third, the United States created a highly dependent Afghan military that collapsed in the wake of our withdrawal. The United States does not have a doctrine for building developing

world military institutions, so our officials go with what they know. In Afghanistan, that meant creating a military that resembled our own instead of one best suited for Afghans.

Our military is the world's envy, so it was natural for Afghan officials to say that they wanted their military to be as capable as ours. Because U.S. officials had no models for different militaries based on local context, they could not identify options and determine which one would create a functional and sustainable military.

I've fought alongside Afghan units and have admired their bravery and ingenuity. However, their frontline troops were demoralized as the Afghan military grew more corrupt. When it became clear that the United States military was leaving for good, the entire structure collapsed like a house of cards.

Systemic Policy and Strategy Errors

To avoid repeating the trend of large-scale U.S. military interventions against insurgencies turning into disasters, the U.S. government needs to address the systemic policy and strategy errors that heighten the risks of failure.

I discuss these problems in detail in *Zero-Sum Victory* and will highlight a few points. The tragedy that unfolded in Afghanistan, and culminated in the Taliban's return to power, stemmed, in part, from incompetence at war termination. The U.S. government has no organized way of thinking about how to bring wars to a successful conclusion.

This shortcoming induces three unforced errors. First, **the United States enters the war with a strategy** designed to achieve a decisive zero-sum victory that has a **low probability of success**. Second, the U.S. government **gets stuck in this losing strategy due to cognitive biases, political frictions and bureaucratic silos, and entrapment by the host nation**. Third, as Americans grow tired of the war, **the president decides to leave and seeks to negotiate**. Knowing the timeline, the enemy waits us out. The host government tries to persuade us to stay while accelerating corruption and dependency. The U.S. gets mired, and disaster strikes when we leave.

This cycle has repeated in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. We know the causes of these failures, so it's time to make the necessary reforms.

Low-Cost, High-Payoff Reforms

I discuss the most vital reforms in *Zero-Sum Victory*. I want to highlight three of them.

First, the United States needs official national security terms and concepts. Too often, U.S. officials talk past one because basic terms like strategy, defeat, reconciliation, and others mean different things to different officials. This terminology should include a playbook for how U.S. agencies cooperate in waging war, including war termination.

As part of this effort, the Departments of State and Defense should create a body of expertise on wartime negotiations for conflicts with active U.S. military engagement. We wing it in negotiations, with poor results.

Second, the United States needs a better doctrine for building military institutions in developing world countries. The U.S. special operations forces are brilliant in developing partner military tactics and skills. The United States needs the same rigor for military institutions. Few developing world situations are suited for a U.S.-style military. Having other models available will lead to more capable and sustainable partner forces with lower corruption risks.

Third, the United States needs to put someone on the ground in charge of our wars. The president has no single official to hold responsible and accountable for coordinating U.S. efforts in theater to achieve our aims. Instead, the United States deploys to combat zones in bureaucratic silos that impede coordination. The whole is less than the sum of its parts.

The silo problem undermines accountability and oversight. As such, military, diplomatic, aid, and intelligence officials testify about the progress they are making in their silos even as the strategic situation unravels. Having an official in theater responsible for coordinating U.S. efforts to achieve the president's aims will reduce these risks, improve performance, and enhance oversight.

I am grateful for the opportunity to present this testimony.