

Dipali Mukhopadhyay, PhD

Associate Professor of Global Policy | University of Minnesota

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“Go-to-Zero: Joe Biden’s Withdrawal Order and the Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan”

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Having spent my adult life engaged in the study of Afghanistan, I consider it a privilege to be here before you to share my thoughts on America’s longest war. I first traveled to Afghanistan as a graduate student in 2004 and made eleven extended trips to the country thereafter, the last in the summer of 2021, less than two months before the collapse of the Afghan republic. I want to start by stating a fact on which I presume we can all agree: this war was not lost in 20 days or 20 months but, rather, over 20 years. Four presidential administrations, Republican and Democrat, made decisions that brought us to this present moment, and each administration’s policies constrained the choices of those who came next. In fact, I would contend that, in many ways, the logic, design, and implementation of the war doomed the Afghan republic to failure. This contention does not suggest malice on the part of American policymakers, many of whom have cared deeply for the Afghan people and their country’s fate. Nor does it absolve those who held power in Afghanistan from the responsibility they share for the Taliban’s return. Instead, it reflects the premise upon which the war was fought – as a response to the horrific attacks that stunned our country on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

The United States and its allies went to war in the fall of 2001, not out of some fundamental concern for women’s rights<sup>i</sup> or the repressive policies of the Taliban, but, rather, because Al Qaeda had found safe haven in Afghanistan. President Bush put it succinctly on September 20, 2001: “From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.”<sup>ii</sup> (Re)building an Afghan state became, in this sense, a means toward the end of countering terror. The promotion of human rights, democracy, and sustainable economic development mattered to the degree they advanced this end. A friendly and permissive government in Kabul – not a sovereign Afghan state – was imperative. As one of the world’s leading scholars on Afghanistan, Dr. Barnett Rubin wrote in 2006, “Building a national state means creating a sovereign center of political accountability, which is not necessarily the same as building an ally in the war on terror.”<sup>iii</sup> This truth helps us understand the “back to the future” moment in which we find ourselves – with the Taliban at the helm of the Afghan state, just as they were in September 2001.

Scholars, journalists, and former policymakers have documented the early strategic choices taken by the United States and its allies that crippled the new Afghan government before it even got started; it is imperative that any analysis of events in 2021 reach back that far. Shock, anguish, and a quest for vengeance took hold in the hours after the World Trade Center towers came down, and those emotions would shape the response in profoundly lasting terms. In October 2001, the Taliban regime faced the might of the U.S. military and suffered a swift defeat. Unlike in many conflicts the world over, however, no ceasefire, surrender agreement, or post-conflict peace process ensued thereafter. The so-called Global War on Terror – unbounded by time or territory – had begun.

When senior Taliban leaders approached Hamid Karzai to negotiate a truce and safe passage, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made clear that no such agreements would be tolerated. Whether at the December 2001 Bonn conference that laid the groundwork for the new republic

or in the early years of the Karzai presidency, none of the overtures made by members of the Taliban were taken up.<sup>iv</sup> Instead, some who sought to surrender found themselves detained at Bagram Airbase, even sent to the new detention camp in Guantanamo Bay. U.N. Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Lakhdar Brahimi, called this early exclusionary posture towards the Taliban “the original sin.”<sup>v</sup>

The United States prevented President Karzai from exploring any genuine possibility of peace with the new republic’s erstwhile enemies, a choice that would haunt subsequent administrations years later when they aimed to negotiate peace with those same enemies on vastly worse terms. Meanwhile, the Coalition’s military approach simultaneously empowered another set of armed actors, the *mujahideen* commanders of the Northern Alliance. These commanders and their fighters represented the core of Operation Enduring Freedom’s ground force in the fall of 2001. As a result, the new Afghan president immediately faced a formidable cohort of competitors and, by the spring of 2002, the International Crisis Group described the regions and provinces outside of Kabul as having “reverted virtually to the status-quo ante of 1992,” one of the bloodiest times of civil war in Afghanistan’s history.<sup>vi</sup>

As I argued in *Warlords, Strongman Governors and the State in Afghanistan*, President Karzai managed this (still armed) competition by doling out political appointments to play rivals against one another and exert Kabul’s influence on the countryside. Many of these men proved themselves committed to the Afghan state-building project and contributed to it in meaningful terms.<sup>vii</sup> But, unsurprisingly, strongman politics did not always produce formal bureaucratic institutions governed by the rule of law. Critics of the Afghan state bemoaned its corruption and abuse as signs of the country’s ungovernability;<sup>viii</sup> but any fair account must acknowledge that many of the country’s more notorious ministers, governors, and police chiefs were prized partners in ongoing U.S. military and intelligence efforts.<sup>ix</sup> Ultimately, foreign powers encouraged transparent and accountable institutions even as they routinely engaged in their own forms of patronage politics, whether with Afghan strongmen or their technocratic counterparts.

The United States, its allies, and a host of international and non-governmental actors invested substantial aid and effort in support of state institutions, but they did so erratically and in unsustainable terms that did not enable the emergence of a genuinely sovereign Afghan government. By 2004–2005, public expenditures in Afghanistan amounted to nearly \$5 billion; more than 70% of that money came from foreign aid spent ‘off-budget,’ meaning “outside the budgetary control of the [Afghan] national government.”<sup>x</sup> The Obama Administration surged military and civilian support in 2009 with a focus on infusing aid and attention at the local level. As Dr. Frances Z. Brown reflected three years into that effort, “American (and Afghan) stated goals for dramatically altering subnational governance were unrealistic for the time allotted and the tools available.”<sup>xi</sup> A good deal of research has demonstrated the deleterious consequences of an aid-driven political economy of this kind. Institutions and, indeed, entire sectors grow vulnerable to corruption. Their leaders answer to foreign donors rather than domestic constituents. And, when those donors withdraw their support, these institutions risk decay or collapse.<sup>xii</sup>

The risks of such built-in dependencies were especially evident in the Afghan National Security and Defense Forces (ANDSF). As early as 2006, Dr. Rubin warned about the unsustainability of the Afghan National Army (ANA) as designed and supported: “In order for Afghanistan to

cover the costs of the ANA with 4% of legal GDP, near the upper limit of the global range of defense spending, it would have to more than quintuple its legal economy.”<sup>xiii</sup> Even as the Afghan army developed as a fighting force, its deep dependencies on the United States persisted. The Obama Administration’s transition of the U.S. military presence to an “advise, train, and assist” posture “revealed the vulnerabilities of the ANDSF, which remained dependent on U.S. support for a number of functions,”<sup>xiv</sup> a fact laid bare by the Taliban’s momentous capture of the northern city of Kunduz in 2015. Afghan War Commission Research Director, Dr. Jonathan Schroden, detailed an acute reliance on American contractors that also helped explain the army’s ultimate collapse. Even in 2020, contractors remained responsible for more than 80% of repairs to Afghan army vehicles and more than 90% to police vehicles.<sup>xv</sup> Over the course of the war, 69,095 Afghan soldiers and police officers lost their lives in the fight against the Taliban.<sup>xvi</sup> As Dr. Schroden wrote, “Contrary to popular perceptions, in many cases and places, the ANDSF fought valiantly to defend the country.”<sup>xvii</sup> But this was a security sector designed to depend on American support – money, equipment, and expertise – and any assessment of its precipitous collapse cannot be divorced from that fact.

The triumph of foreign agendas, interests, and designs over Afghan self-determination was perhaps best exemplified by the international community’s approach to elections. Having made my first trip to Afghanistan just months before the country’s first presidential election, I can attest that the Afghan people responded with great enthusiasm and courage to the proposition that they would choose their own leaders. Even in the face of violent insurgent opposition, they turned out to vote year after year. This enthusiasm can be understood in the context of an indigenous tradition of constitutionalism and participatory politics that dates back more than a century.<sup>xviii</sup> Just the same, research on post-conflict politics has long cautioned that hastily held elections can yield illiberal, even violent politics.<sup>xix</sup> The international community’s aims for these elections were over-ambitious and overly complex: donors nudged the Afghans towards an election calendar that the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction warned in 2010 “would result in no fewer than fourteen elections (and seven different types of elections) over the next seventeen years.”<sup>xx</sup>

Indeed, the post-2004 presidential and parliamentary elections were marred by fraud and contention. As political scientist Dr. Anna Larson explained, given the 2004 success “and continued time pressure to meet the deadlines laid out in the Bonn Agreement, electoral officials (including international experts) downplayed the levels of fraud” early on. But, in a highly centralized political system like Afghanistan’s, national elections represent a zero-sum game, and fraud (as well as accusations of fraud) matter greatly; a contest over election results can start a civil war. From 2009 on, international actors dove into the fray as electoral stand-offs threatened to devolve into violent conflict. In 2014, Secretary of State John Kerry flew to Kabul to arbitrate the first electoral standoff between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah and, in the process, brokered a compromise in the form of the National Unity Government. While the deal averted a conflagration, it felt like an American imposition to many Abdullah supporters and produced a two-headed executive (with a president and a chief executive officer) with little hope of effective governance at a time when it was sorely needed. In the words of the bipartisan Afghanistan Study Group’s final report, “as every Afghan presidential election since 2004 has shown, the international community, and the United States in particular, have become major, albeit often ineffective, local political actors.”<sup>xxi</sup>

The international approach to Afghan elections was tied, in other words, to the shifting preferences of foreign powers. By the time the 2019 presidential election arrived, the Trump Administration had made clear that the time for American involvement in Afghanistan was over. Having deployed additional troops in the summer of 2017, President Trump precipitously ordered the withdrawal of half of the remaining 14,000 U.S. soldiers from Afghanistan in December 2018. This decision prompted the resignation of Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis. Six months earlier, the administration had launched a new diplomatic effort with the Taliban, and the aim of reaching a deal swiftly now took precedence above all else. Historian Dr. Carter Malkasian described the new American position as follows: “Better to complete a U.S.-Taliban agreement and be on the road toward an Afghan political settlement before the election could be a problem ... How the government’s democracy could be reconciled with the Taliban’s emirate was unexplored territory.”<sup>xxii</sup>

The ultimate precarity of Afghan sovereignty would be most vividly revealed in February 2020 when the Trump Administration signed the Doha Agreement with the Taliban. This pact would spell the end of the Afghan republic for all intents and purposes. While the Obama Administration had negotiated with the Taliban for the release of U.S. soldier, Bowe Bergdahl, in 2014, it had “refused to talk to the Taliban on issues concerning Afghanistan’s political future without the presence of Afghan government representatives.”<sup>xxiii</sup> From 2018 onwards, as the lead U.S. negotiator on behalf of the Trump Administration, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad claimed that no U.S.-Taliban agreement would take hold absent an agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government. In his words, “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

And, yet, the 2020 Doha deal represented a major boon to the Taliban, undercutting any remaining leverage the Afghan government might have had in subsequent negotiations to bring this devastating insurgency to an end without entirely sacrificing the values and aspirations of the republic. Having signed the agreement, the Trump Administration dropped U.S. troop levels on the ground to 4,500 and, then, just days before President Biden’s inauguration, to 2,500. As the Afghan Study Group noted in early 2021, these reductions were “greater than required by the Doha agreement,”<sup>xxv</sup> leaving the new president with a very small remaining military footprint and a May 2021 deadline to complete the withdrawal. Meanwhile, the Afghan government, in disarray after its latest contested election, was effectively forced to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, a provision in the deal to which it had not been a party. I was in Kabul in March 2020, and the sense of collective despair was palpable amongst ordinary Afghans, deeply disillusioned with their leaders but also resentful that their country’s experiment with democracy mattered little to the Americans as we beat a path to the exits.

My last visit to Kabul in the summer of 2021 is one I will never forget. I sensed that Afghan leaders were both disbelieving about the impending U.S. departure – and, therefore unprepared for our exit – and yet also so crippled by its possibility that dysfunction seemed to have arrested the entire state. More striking, however, were the courage and commitment of my many long-time interlocutors in universities, the media, the civil service, and across activist spaces – they understood that all they had worked so hard and lost so much to build was now in jeopardy. They vowed not to give up, though ultimately nearly all of them were forced to leave their homeland for fear of persecution or death with the Taliban’s return. It is the remarkable progress they secured in their own communities and the society at large that gives me great optimism in the country’s long-term future. Their sacrifices – as well as those of our

own soldiers, diplomats, and aid workers – demand honest and deep reflection on our part. The United States may not engage in large-scale state-building in the service of countering terrorism again, but all of our interventions have the potential to disrupt politics in profound terms. It is my hope that we learn from the Afghan experience both the productive possibilities and acute limits of American power and wield it with humility and care going forward.

## Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> Lila Abu Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2015).
- <sup>ii</sup> George W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” United States Capitol, Washington, D.C., September 20, 2011
- <sup>iii</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, “Peace Building and State-building in Afghanistan: Constructing Sovereignty for Whose Security?” *Third World Quarterly* 27 No. 1 (2006): 179.
- <sup>iv</sup> Rubin, “What I Saw in Afghanistan,” *The New Yorker*, July 1, 2015.
- <sup>v</sup> Steve Brooking, “Why Was a Negotiated Peace Always Out of Reach in Afghanistan? Opportunities and Obstacles, 2001–21,” *Peaceworks* No. 184 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, August 2022): 4.
- <sup>vi</sup> “The Loyal Jirga: One Small Step Forward?” Afghanistan Briefing (Kabul/Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2002): 3.
- <sup>vii</sup> Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- <sup>viii</sup> For more on the reductive narratives and tropes that have long animated Western attitudes toward Afghanistan, see Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
- <sup>ix</sup> “Ironically, by supporting the warlords, both the United States and the broader international community weakened the state institutions they were helping to create,” in Kimberly Marten, “Warlordism in Comparative Perspective,” *International Security* 31 No 3 (2006/2007): 46.
- <sup>x</sup> As reported by the Afghan Ministry of Finance, in Rubin (2006): 179.
- <sup>xi</sup> Frances Z. Brown, “The U.S. Surge and Afghan Local Governance: Lessons for Transition,” Special Report No. 316 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2012): 15.
- <sup>xii</sup> For an exploration of this argument in the Afghan context, see Astri Suhrke, *When More Is Less: The International Project on Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2011); Kate Clark, “The Cost of Support to Afghanistan: Considering Inequality, Poverty and Lack of Democracy through the ‘Rentier State’ Lens” (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 2020).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Rubin (2006): 181.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Afghanistan Study Group Final Report (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, February 2021): 37.
- <sup>xv</sup> Jonathan Schroden, “Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan’s Security Forces,” *CTC Sentinel* (October 2021): 47.
- <sup>xvi</sup> “Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars,” Costs of War Project (Providence, R.I.: Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs, Brown University, 2021), available online at: <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/WarDeathToll>
- <sup>xvii</sup> Schroden (2021): 54.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Anna Larson, “Democracy in Afghanistan: Amid and Beyond Conflict,” Special Report No. 497 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2021).
- <sup>xix</sup> Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War,” *International Security* 20, no. 1 (Summer 1995): 5–38; Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (November–December 1997): 22–43; and Roland Paris, *At War’s End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- <sup>xx</sup> “Lessons Learned in Preparing and Conducting Elections in Afghanistan,” Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, September 2010, available online at: <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/alerts/2010-09-09audit-10-16.pdf>.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Afghanistan Study Group Final Report (2021): 30.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021): 437–8.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Afghanistan Study Group Final Report (2021): 19.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Siyar Sirat, “Nothing is Agreed Until Everything is Agreed: Khalilzad,” *Tolo News*, January 26, 2019.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Afghanistan Study Group Final Report (2021): 13.