
Assessing the Military Coalition: The Afghan Experience

SHREYAS DESHMUKH

This paper will reflect on the stated military objectives in the context of the Afghan War by the US, NATO, and other coalition partners. They planned the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in five phases: assessment and preparation; geographic expansion; stabilization; transition; and redeployment.¹ The goals of this strategy were to disrupt terrorist networks in Afghanistan and diminish their ability to launch international terrorist attacks; promote a capable, accountable, and effective government; develop self-reliant Afghan security forces that could lead to counter-insurgency efforts with reduced U.S. assistance; and involve the international community to actively assist in addressing these objectives.² Comparative analysis of these objectives and the outcome of the war suggest that the coalition forces have failed. The Taliban is back in power without shedding its extremist ideological worldview. Al-Qaeda, Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), and other terrorist organisations continue to find a safe haven in the mountainous regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Opium production has doubled since 2002, potentially providing new financial resources to insurgent and terrorist organisations. This failure is a result of two primary issues among coalition partners: lack of political consensus and experience. As the Afghan experience stands to define the terms of engagement with armed insurgents and terrorist organizations in the future, the war is critical to study.

Shreyas Deshmukh is a research associate with the National Security program at Delhi Policy Group, a think tank in New Delhi, India. Previously, he worked with MitKat Advisory Services as a geopolitical risk analyst and at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) as a research assistant. He holds a master's degree in Defense and Strategic Studies from the University of Pune in Pune, India. He frequently writes on the geopolitical developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan. His academic focus is on socio-political and security issues in South Asia.

BACKGROUND

U.S. and coalition forces, including fifty different countries at some point, withdrew completely from Afghanistan on August 30, 2021. The withdrawal marked the end of a nearly twenty-year conflict and the military defeat of a formidable force by an insurgent organisation. Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, NATO invoked Article 5, triggering a collective defence response with the U.S. leading a coalition of troops.³ The next month, the U.S. launched counterterrorism “Operation Enduring Freedom” with the support of the U.K.⁴ The reaction to the September 11 attacks was decisive; President Bush faced significant internal pressure to punish the culprits of the worst terrorist attack on American soil and to protect the United States’ image as a superpower.

Other NATO and non-NATO allies soon joined the U.S. under the command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), created by UN Security Council resolution 1386, “to root out terrorism” and “provide security and law and order” in Afghanistan.⁵ The initial objective of ISAF’s mission was to assist the Afghan Government in maintaining security in and around Kabul. Under the UN Security Council mandate, it gradually widened its scope of operation to the entire country. The U.S. counterterrorism operation primarily focused on dismantling Al-Qaeda’s infrastructure and toppling the Taliban Regime, which had given refuge to Osama Bin Laden. Unfortunately, coalition leaders only started realizing the gravity of internal socio-political complexities on the ground after invading Afghanistan, suggesting that initial decisions were taken without any strategic vision.⁶ Only thereafter, in the 2002 NATO-Prague Summit, heads of State and governments of the member countries approved the “military concept for defence against Terrorism”.⁷ The concept was adopted to “strengthen NATO’s capabilities in counterterrorism by ‘improving intelligence’ sharing and ‘crisis response arrangements.’”⁸ Until this point, counterterrorism was not a priority issue for NATO, as the alliance was primarily concentrated on conventional threats emanating from the Euro-Atlantic region. In fact, Afghanistan was the first “out of area” combat mission for NATO.

In December 2001, at the UN-led Bonn conference organised to discuss post-conflict “provisional arrangements” and “re-establishment of permanent government institutions” in Afghanistan, the coalition partners agreed to work toward installing democratic rights for the Afghan people, therein demonstrating a united determination to end the “tragic conflict.”⁹

LACK OF POLITICAL CONSENSUS

Previous invasions of Afghanistan, by the British Empire and Soviet Union, were unilateral interventions carried out under a sole authority. Such interventions did not require political consensus between different states on military objectives. The mission of NATO in 2001 was a test of the political will of the alliance to fight for collective defence. Since the beginning of the operation, aside from the U.S. and partially the U.K., many NATO countries have shown an insufficient will to share equally the economic and military resources required by the war.¹⁰ It took 12 years for NATO to define terrorism as a strategic challenge, officially setting policy guidelines on counterterrorism in 2012.¹¹ The reason for this was that NATO member states held differing views on the issue of terrorism. For example, the US adopted a direct military approach through the “War on Terror”, while European states focused on nation-building to eradicate the root causes of terrorism. These differences were reflected in their operational activities on the ground, with the U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) led by military officers, and the Dutch and German PRTs giving preference to civilian experts.¹² The U.S. was a major donor to Afghanistan reconstruction projects, of which the majority of funds were channelled through the Department of Defence (DOD). The DOD, however, lacked trained manpower for robust contractor oversight, and this led to increased corruption within military ranks.¹³ The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction reports indicated an increase in the number of corruption cases from 2010 onwards, the same period when President Obama announced a surge in American troops.¹⁴

Initially, NATO allies committed troops for ISAF under the assumption that such troops would follow the model of UN peacekeeping missions, and they imposed restrictions on soldiers from participating in the active counterterror operations, with an exception for scenarios of self-defence.¹⁵ Differences also emerged over the treatment of prisoners by the CIA when the issue was raised by the Dutch and Italians, who contributed a large number of troops.¹⁶ The European Agencies such as the Directorate-General for Internal Policies produced reports for EU Parliament over the “US CIA-led extraordinary rendition and secret detention programme and its serious human rights violations.”¹⁷ Additionally, ongoing conflicts within European countries impacted the coalition’s cohesion in Afghanistan. For example, in reaction to its disputes with other EU countries, Turkey blocked NATO’s intelligence sharing with non-NATO EU members.¹⁸

As the timeline stretched on, economic and political fault lines within the alliance widened. NATO member states' political leaders began losing support for the war in their respective countries.¹⁹ This resulted in the "Americanization" of the war, as the U.S. unilaterally concluded the alliance's agreement with the Taliban in February 2020 and decided to withdraw all troops. For this, they provided a poor justification and faulty withdrawal strategy. Conversely, other coalition partners like the UK and Germany had been planning to increase the strength of their forces to push back the Taliban and create more suitable political and military conditions for the withdrawal.²⁰ These conditions would better help the alliance to claim success in the war. Finally, deep mistrust and incoherence within the coalition led to chaos during the withdrawal of troops in August 2021, raising questions over the force projection capabilities of NATO beyond European turf. On the one hand, European leaders were in search of face-saving justifications for the withdrawal of their troops. On the other hand, newly elected President Biden had enough political capital to withdraw American troops without providing any justification over tasks laid down in Bonn, leaving them for sorting out by Afghans themselves. Political differences in the war's approach and interpretation of ground realities had persisted in the coalition from the beginning of this conflict until its end. These differences are reflected in the professional inexperience in tackling counterterrorism operations.

EXPERIENCE DEFICIENCY

Post-9/11, Western leadership was not prepared to respond to another crisis and deal with the political fallout, especially if a similar attack was carried out on their soil from Afghanistan. Thus, fear-based, short-horizon planning was at the core of all decision-making vis-à-vis war in Afghanistan, particularly in the USD 2.13 trillion spent by the U.S.²¹

With such enormous resources, in the first year of Operation Enduring Freedom, American forces successfully rooted out the Taliban from most of Afghanistan. This was followed by the expansion of coalition troops, which were given the task of reconstruction. However, the resurgence of the Taliban around 2006 forced another increase in the number of troops. Such early setback exhibited NATO military commanders' inexperience in counterinsurgency operations, as they failed to inhibit the cyclical nature of war. Following 2006, most of the strategies were tactical and reactionary in nature. For example, there was not an adequate number of troops consistently present, which could have fostered more confidence amongst the population regarding the coalition.²²

The unreliability of foreign forces forced people to consider an alternate reality in which they would have to face the Taliban alone one day.²³ Even Afghan security forces, who had heavily relied on coalition troops for combat support, started deserting after realizing this fact.²⁴ Furthermore, the use of excessive airpower by American troops proved counterproductive due to collateral damage.²⁵ Winning hearts and minds in counterinsurgency situations requires a long-term development strategy and patience. Even the state-building approach in Afghanistan was poorly sequenced, as the coalition “tried to construct national political institutions before establishing basic control” and leaned on local warlords to implement projects.²⁶

The American political leadership lacked an understanding of the nature of war as U.S. presidents tended to rely on a chronological approach (conduct of military operations based on a timeline) for electoral and political gains. For example, while announcing new deployments of troops in 2009, President Obama also laid down a plan for complete withdrawal by 2014.²⁷ During a speech on “The Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia,” President Trump provided details of his new approach towards the region, advocating a shift from a time-based to a condition-based approach (conduct of military operations based on ground conditions),²⁸ but eventually followed the same pattern as his predecessors’ and agreed on a timetable of complete withdrawal of troops (the Doha Agreement). At that point, the insurgents only had to wait out the gradual withdrawal, maintain the momentum of their insurgency, and steadily extending their area of influence in order to defeat the superpower. The Taliban’s strategy resulted in the fall of most Afghan provinces in a domino effect, as the strength of Afghan National Security Forces rapidly melted away just a few days before the completion of the withdrawal.

Aside from the political interests and other intervening factors, such as economic incentives linked with conflict, the communication gap between the political and the military leadership of the coalition forces may have misconstrued the political objectives into military goals, resulting in further chaos in Afghanistan. Waging a generational war without thoroughly drafted strategies to achieve political interests put military leadership in a challenging position. On the one hand, they had to provide justifications for their actions in their respective capitals. On the other hand, in the absence of any tangible political objective, they had to keep the morale of the troops high by defining military objectives. This has led to a war without direction and a situation of unrest that continues to consume a vast amount of resources.

POLITICAL VS. MILITARY OBJECTIVES

In 2019, “The Afghanistan Papers”—a collection of interviews and memos of generals, diplomats, and other insiders who served in Afghanistan and released by *The Washington Post* in 2019—indicated that there were no positive scenarios for a way out of the crisis. Officials alluded to a lack of a coherent strategy to bring back security and stability in Afghanistan under democratic governance structure.²⁹ Adding credence to an apparent lack of coherence, the unplanned withdrawal of U.S.-NATO coalition troops left Afghanistan in the hands of extremist forces, severely aggravating the security situation in the region, and international stability.

There are apparent contradictions between the political justifications of these actions and the political objectives laid out at the beginning of the conflict in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, conventionally, the political objectives of war remain intangible, making it difficult or impossible to quantify success. Even the objectives of the Vietnam War are still debatable. After three decades of the Vietnam War, then U.S. Defence Secretary Robert McNamara, who played a major role during the war, conceded that America should not have intervened in Vietnam, as there were flaws in the Domino Theory that established Hanoi as the pawn of Beijing or Moscow.³⁰ A set of declassified papers from the Vietnam War famously known as the ‘Pentagon Papers’ provide detailed insights into the political justifications of the war and how the war’s objectives continued to evolve as it progressed.³¹ Another example is the American intervention in Iraq, which was justified with false assumptions, or bad intelligence, regarding the presence of weapons of mass destruction.

Afghanistan is no exception. Political objectives evolve based on the necessity to justify actions by current leadership. During his remarks about the end of the war in Afghanistan, U.S. President Joe Biden stated that his country achieved what was intended from the invasion, namely “deliver[ing] justice to Bin Laden.”³² However, this statement leaves out the larger objective agreed upon at Bonn. President Biden also concluded that any extended presence of coalition troops would have proved futile.³³ Such justification indicates that the decision to withdraw forces from Afghanistan was a political compulsion for President Biden to avoid further violence.³⁴ If the U.S. and allied troops had to withdraw because of the threat from the Taliban, certainly one of the primary objectives—establishing a secure environment in Afghanistan—was not achieved.

Unlike political leadership, military commanders cannot go to war without a clear objective and plan to achieve it. The Afghan conflict once

again proved that, in protracted wars, political objectives evolve based on the socio-economic compulsions and ideology of leaders.³⁵ Military strategy evolves during the course of war to convert political objectives into operational tactics to be implemented. Concurrently, these strategies and tactics need to be drawn within the limits of legal justification for the actions of soldiers on the ground. Therefore, while political objectives may be reinterpreted for decades, on the contrary, military objectives are immediately judged on the scale of success and failure, making use of concrete legal, economic, security, and other parameters.

In the case of Afghanistan, despite careful planning, in reality, military operations and objectives remained dissonant due to the lack of coordination among multiple states and their politico-military establishments. A complicated military structure evolved due to the prolongation of conflict. The lack of political consensus within coalition States did not allow consistency within the strategy to achieve stated objectives. Military commanders, unlike political leaders, cannot make decisions based on intentionally ambiguous policies. Rather, they must clearly enunciate their strategic and tactical objectives, which require the continuation of policy regardless of a change in governance.

CONCLUSION

After two decades of international presence, including thousands of foreign forces and nation-building exercises backed with the investment of trillions of dollars, Afghanistan is still in disarray. The apt failure of US-led military intervention against the Taliban, due to a lack of clear objectives, consensus, and inexperience, raises questions over the ability of NATO to conduct counterinsurgency/counterterrorism operations and highlights political differences between coalition members. However, military commanders, unlike political leaders, cannot make decisions based on cognitive bias or advance intentionally ambiguous policies. Rather, they must clearly enunciate their strategic and tactical objectives, primarily with regard to defining the identity of the enemy and why they must be defeated. This basic requirement could not be attained, as the political designation of the Taliban by coalition members was kept in flux due to a fluid concept of terrorism that is frequently molded to suit a political justification in Afghanistan.

The Taliban, which started in the 1990s as a regressive Islamic regime, was later termed a terrorist organisation due to its role in the 9/11 attacks. The leadership of the Taliban and associated groups, such as the Haqqani network, were sanctioned by the UNSC. As the war progressed,

the Taliban was labelled as an insurgent organisation, and later during the peace process, it was termed as an armed political opposition and angry brothers by Afghan leaders.³⁶ After the withdrawal of coalition forces, it was redefined as a political actor demanding international legitimacy. This periodic change in the Taliban's status was reflected in the coalition's confused military strategies, where their soldiers could not consistently identify the enemy and lost the original purpose of the war. Here lies the difference between conventional war and counterinsurgency/counterterrorism operations.

Soldiers trained for combat were given the task of nation-building due to the unstable security environment which did not allow Afghan political forces and civil society members to act freely. In the past, some of the NATO members have conducted nation-building exercises in stable and familiar European theatres, such as the Balkans. Comparatively, Afghanistan and Iraq were unfamiliar territories, culturally as well as geographically.

However, this defeat has emboldened extremist organisations all over the world and increased the importance of sustained insurgency, which can lead to victory for these groups even against superpowers, and provide legitimacy to their acts and ideologies. The coalition experience in Afghanistan emphasizes the need for a new collective strategy to tackle terrorists and extremist insurgency movements. This should tackle fundamental issues like political consensus over approaches for counterinsurgency/counterterrorism missions, nation-building exercises, preserving human rights, and sharing experiences, going beyond personal geo-political agendas. That should provide a coherent objective to military forces, while drafting a coherent strategy to tackle terrorism, reducing the probability of repeating the mistakes made in Afghanistan. *f*

ENDNOTES

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