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Twenty Years of Military Operations in Afghanistan: Key Questions

After 20 years of operations, training, investment and capacity building, the swift collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), followed by the Taliban's takeover of the country, is prompting debate on how such a significant strategic setback could take place. Many observers attribute such failures to the decisions made by the United States and its European and other partners at the time the Taliban was ousted from power in late 2001, including how to structure post-Taliban governance and Afghan security forces. The outcome of the campaign also provides an opportunity to reflect on how the U.S. military conducted its operations alongside its coalition partners, as well as the overall efficacy of the military as an instrument for achieving strategic goals.

Section 1080 of H.R. 4350 (H.Rept. 117-118), the Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act, would establish a Commission on Afghanistan that would assess the war in Afghanistan and make recommendations to inform future operations. Senate action is pending.

Learning from the Past to Prepare for the Future?

Some observers contend that too much focus on adopting lessons learned from the Afghanistan into extant doctrine, training, and operational approaches risks the United States adapting to fight previous wars, rather than future ones. Others maintain that such scrutiny is necessary, because capabilities that were utilized during the Afghanistan campaign, such as foreign military capacity building and whole-of-government operational approaches, can potentially be adapted to better allow the U.S. to contend with great power competition, hybrid and gray zone warfare, and other contingencies. Further, many of the perceived critical deficiencies in the Afghan campaign were present at levels of decisionmaking in Washington DC, coalition capitals, and Kabul—making it difficult to translate gains on the ground into overall success. Taken together, these choices could indicate broad systemic issues with the manner by which the United States, alongside its coalition partners, prosecutes its wars. Left unaddressed, such problems might hamper future U.S. war efforts.

Campaign (In)Coherence?

Unity of command, that is, a clear delineation of who reports to whom in a military hierarchy, is a key principle for military operations. To some observers, the organization of operations in Afghanistan, both geographically and functionally, “failed to achieve unity of command or unity of effort,” for significant durations of the campaign. Geographically, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF, 2003-2014) phase of the campaign was organized by province as well as by region.

Different coalition countries led Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and clustered their military forces' presence and activities around their respective PRT's activities. National capitals therefore had de facto decisionmaking input when it came to the conduct of operations in the provinces, which was at times in tension with directives from the Regional Command (RCs) or ISAF Headquarters. Other countries placed de jure limitations on the activities their forces could perform (e.g., restricting night operations), called caveats.

Afghanistan-wide, the United States conducted a number of military or paramilitary efforts that were arguably distinct enough to be considered campaigns in their own right:

- Security operations, largely performed by battalion-sized task forces, intended to create the conditions whereby governance building and development activities could take place. Later in the campaign these operations were conducted by partnering with ANDSF. Complicating matters somewhat, the ANDSF organized its corps structures along different geographical boundaries than the ISAF/coalition RCs.
- ANDSF capacity development operations designed to train and equip hundreds of thousands of Afghan forces to be subsequently fielded across Afghanistan. Other nonmilitary U.S. government elements established and trained separate Afghan paramilitary units, primarily used for counter-terrorism purposes.
- Counter-terrorism operations, some of which were conducted by U.S. and coalition Special Operations Forces. The compartmented nature of some of their activities meant that, at times, coalition partners did not have visibility into such activities happening in their areas of responsibility.

The organization of the military campaign arguably caused unhelpful frictions and seams among components. A key question is whether, and to what extent, the manner by which military efforts in Afghanistan were organized contributed to the overall failure of the campaign.

Campaign Continuity?

In part due to studies showing that since 1945 successful counterinsurgencies last an average of 14 years (see Jones, “Further Reading”), experts and officials argued that succeeding in Afghanistan would likely require a long-term approach. Yet deployment cycles (often between six months to a year during the Afghanistan campaign), designed to balance operational needs with the morale and welfare of servicemembers and their families, arguably resulted in short-term approaches to operations. As a result, many observers described campaign continuity as a

significant problem, asserting that the United States did not fight one 20-year war, rather, it fought 20 one-year wars as troops and key leaders rotated in and out of theater. Efforts to mitigate that problem through programs designed to build greater on-the-ground situational and cultural awareness—such as Human Terrain Teams or the Af/Pak Hands program—were arguably stymied by bureaucratic inertia and management challenges. Policymakers might consider whether alternative methods to mitigate the U.S. structural bias toward short-term campaign mindsets might be feasible.

The Metrics Conundrum?

Measuring progress in the campaign in order to know whether the United States was succeeding or failing was an inherently difficult and ultimately ineffective analytic endeavor. Considerable weight was placed on measuring inputs, such as how many ANDSF were trained, rather than outcomes, such as whether Afghan troops could and would support the Kabul-based government. Further, strategic objectives for the campaign shifted over time—moving from creating stability to counterinsurgency to training the ANDSF. It therefore became more difficult to define what success actually looked like and, relatedly, what needed to be measured to understand whether the United States was achieving its goals. Policymakers may rethink and revitalize military operational analytic capabilities, so as to better assess whether the U.S. is succeeding in future wartime efforts.

Whole of Government?

Officials from successive Administrations repeatedly argued that succeeding in Afghanistan would require marshalling the appropriate resources and capabilities of all the agencies in the U.S. government. Yet bureaucratic stovepiping and ineffective overall coordination seemingly translated into inter-agency friction and a failure to execute a truly whole-of-government campaign. Some maintain that this is because the only executive branch institution where agencies come together to coordinate such activities is the National Security Council, which is not statutorily designed to be an operational body in charge of complex military operations. Efforts in the mid-2000s to study and redesign the interagency to improve whole-of-government activities and operations such as the Project on National Security Reform did not lead to institutional changes that could have potentially improved operational coherence amongst departments and agencies during the Afghanistan campaign and beyond. If whole-of-government approaches might be needed in future wars, policymakers might examine whether, and why not, U.S. national security institutions are designed to deliver “whole of government” solutions.

Campaign Resourcing?

Related to the above, over the course of 20 years, assessments of the efficacy of military efforts vis-a-vis civilian programs changed significantly. Initially, military commanders briefed that significant progress was being made in counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and training and equipping the ANDSF. In 2017, then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis reportedly stated, “We were not winning the war in Afghanistan.” Despite recognition of the declining efficacy of the military in the campaign, the Department of Defense received the lion’s share of the resources associated with prosecuting the campaign, rather

than the State Department or U.S. Agency for International Development. It has been suggested by one commentator (see Livieratos, “Further Reading”) that

the military offer[ed] positive assessments only a few individuals had the requisite knowledge to challenge, [and] there were few incentives for civilians to stop rewarding the military, which reinforced the military’s existing approach. For the military, Congress’ tacit approval and the distribution of individual and organizational rewards created perverse incentives for officers at all levels to misrepresent information. This mutually beneficial process became self-reinforcing for both military *and* civilian leadership, making it extremely difficult to change strategy or end the war entirely.

As described above, much of the problem—aside from credible metrics—appears to be cultural, which will likely require efforts by all parties, including Congress, to rectify.

The Institutional Impact on the U.S. Military?

Many observers have compared military efforts in Afghanistan to the Vietnam War, in large part because both conflicts resulted in the fall of U.S.-supported security institutions. The U.S. military after Vietnam was reportedly plagued with widespread drug abuse, discipline problems, and racial tensions, and was considered demoralized and ineffective. Experts generally agree it took at least a decade to rebuild and reform the U.S. military after Vietnam. Some experts (see Barno & Bensahel, “Further Reading”) contend that “losing a war can be debilitating for any military organization and can deeply erode morale and confidence” and “left unaddressed, they could imperil the long-term health and effectiveness of the all-volunteer force.” To address the institutional health of the U.S. military, some suggest that it examine what went wrong during the 20 years of war and demonstrate that it has processed and learned from those lessons; that U.S. military leaders should clearly identify what went wrong with the evacuation from Afghanistan and take full responsibility for their part; and that senior DOD leaders and service leadership should guide the U.S. military to somehow absorb the loss of the war in Afghanistan constructively.

Further Reading

Seth Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, The RAND Corporation (2008), p. 10.

David Barno & Nora Bensahel, “When America’s All-Volunteer Force Loses a War,” *War on the Rocks*, September 21, 2021.

Cole Livieratos, “The Subprime Strategy Crisis: Failed Strategic Assessment in Afghanistan,” *War on the Rocks*, September 15, 2021.

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