

FROM INTERVENTION TO EXIT: AN ANALYSIS OF POST-9/11 US STRATEGIES IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

Following the US exit from Afghanistan, the debate revolves around why US intervention in Afghanistan, the longest and one of the most expensive in its history, has failed in defeating the Taliban and realising a durable state-building. The debate considers endogenous factors that explore US and Taliban strategies and exogenous factors that underline the role of regional and extra-regional actors in determining the outcome of the Afghan conflict. This paper, therefore, focuses on faults and inconsistencies within and across US strategies in Afghanistan, i.e., the use of military force, political settlement, and state-building. It also examines US strategies vis-à-vis conflict in Afghanistan under four US administrations – from Bush to Biden – to ascertain why these strategies proved ineffective. These strategies have been analysed by following the conceptual framework of Game Theory. The paper argues that US strategies for entering Afghanistan were detached from the ground realities, which was the critical factor for its failure to achieve the desired outcome of the conflict.

Keywords: Afghanistan, US Intervention, Use of Force, State-building, Taliban.

Introduction

Afghanistan stands as one of the most intractable and complex issues in contemporary international relations. The country has constantly been undergoing internal and external conflicts in the modern era. Though Afghanistan is not a large country by territory and population, its geostrategic importance has attracted the intervention of great powers time and again. It is located at the crossroads of South, Central, and East Asia, linking China and Asia to Europe through the ancient Silk Route. Today, states, particularly China, are pursuing the revival of old trade routes; but the strategic position of Afghanistan has been causing frequent invasions. In the 19th century, it suffered from the Great Game collision between Britain and Tsarist Russia. In the 1980s, it underwent a conflict mainly because of the Cold War rivalry between the US and the USSR. Since the 1979-Soviet invasion, Afghanistan has constantly been in a state of turmoil, including the US 20-year military campaign after the 9/11 incident.

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These longstanding disputes left Afghanistan least developed among the comity of nations.

Taliban takeover in 1996, amidst a bloody civil war in the country, soon turned problematic. The radical policies of the Taliban regime and its close association with Al Qaeda provoked a critical response from the world, especially from the west. The 9/11 incident, therefore, proved to be a turning point when the US decided to undertake military intervention in Afghanistan to dismantle Al Qaeda safe havens and take away the Taliban regime. However, US-led armed intervention in Afghanistan became the longest in history and failed to quell the Taliban, who returned to power even before the US completed its exit. This most-expensive War on Terror evidenced the most critical failure for the US state-building objective. While consuming its overtired military means, the US eventually reached an exit deal with the Taliban in February 2020. Following President Joe Biden's withdrawal announcement, the security and governance structures built by the US and its allies over the past twenty years collapsed within days, consequent to the Taliban's *blitzkrieg*.

The US intervention in Afghanistan can be explained by employing Game Theory variables. Game Theory, introduced by John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, was initially conceptualised as an economic theory;¹ however, theorists of Political Science and International Relations soon started adapting it. In simple words, the Game Theory deals with a rational decision in conflict situations.² It involves interaction among four variables: players, their respective strategies, corresponding outcomes, and each player's resulting payoffs.³ In this context, each player is rational and determines its choice of method by using knowledge regarding options and gains of other players involved in the game.

The US entered Afghanistan to dissolve the Taliban's government, unwilling to hand over al Qaeda leaders as primary suspects of the 9/11 incident. Correspondingly, the US employed three strategies to deal with the perplexing situation, i.e., use of military force, political settlement, and state-building in Afghanistan. Initially, it was successful in ousting and pushing away the Taliban. However, following the Taliban's regrouping and insurgency from 2005 onwards, the US failed to defeat the group. The state-building project also had its flaws; above all, it was imposed through the corrupt elite without considering the local socio-political and cultural norms. Likewise, the US realization for political settlement came too late and too slow to cover up the failure of the previous two strategies. The common problem with US strategies was its failure to determine choices keeping in view the options and payoffs of the Taliban. The Taliban fought asymmetrical war involving guerrilla warfare tactics, while the US primarily relied on traditional war strategies. The Taliban had an advantage in knowing physical geography and being ahead of local support.

Therefore, the abrupt withdrawal of US-led coalition forces raises serious questions regarding conflict resolution in Afghanistan. US strategies to deal with the Afghan conflict lacked coherence and often changed over time. The US choice of political settlement was the only attempt for a face-saving exit. The US started with a

military invasion to defeat the Taliban and then shifted focus to state-building. Finally, it concluded a withdrawal deal with the Taliban leaving Afghanistan on its own. With the Taliban back in power and the country still on the verge of collapse, Afghanistan represents a blatantly failed US international intervention. Therefore, this paper examines US strategies employed in Afghanistan since 2001, intending to identify the faults that led to US failure in resolving the conflict.

US Post-9/11 Strategies in Afghanistan

The US intervention in Afghanistan is characterised by a lack of clarity and inconsistency about policies, strategic objectives, and simultaneous execution. In 2001, the Bush administration entirely relied on a war model to punish al Qaeda and its supporters, the Taliban. After initial military successes, the US administration attempted to build a western-style democratic government in Afghanistan on the Weberian model. Meanwhile, the Taliban reunited and consolidated themselves in the peripheries of Afghanistan and initiated guerrilla attacks targeting US-led coalition forces. Bush administration adopted a counterterrorism strategy but could not check the Taliban's advances. Later, the Obama administration came up with its policy of 'troop surge' followed by the 'exit plan' that could be implemented partially given the adverse security situation in Afghanistan. In the late 2020s, the Trump administration somewhat succeeded in concluding a peace deal with the Taliban but failed to ensure an intra-Afghan political settlement. Subsequently, the Biden administration faced worldwide criticism for mismanaging the exit from Afghanistan, thus causing the Taliban's rapid takeover and US humiliating departure. This overview of US' Afghan strategies adopted by four consecutive US administrations to deal with the conflict indicates an overriding fact that each method failed to yield the desired outcome.

Strategies of Bush Administration

Bush administration employed military force to invade Afghanistan and soon embarked upon multilateral state-building efforts as the key strategies for resolving the conflict.

a) Use of Military Force

In his September 20, 2001 speech, President George W. Bush outlined the fundamentals of US strategy vis-à-vis the War on Terror. He declared that not just one battle, instead of a lengthy campaign unprecedented in US history, was expected to pursue US interests. He also claimed that terrorists would be deprived of all finances and denied space to run away; further, no state would help or shelter terrorists.⁴ Bush administration adopted a model of proactive military action (pre-emptive self-defence), arguing that the only way to defeat terrorism is to destroy it in the den.

Resultantly, on May 1, 2003, Donald Rumsfeld, the then US Secretary of Defence, announced victory over the Taliban, thus ending combat operations.⁵ Earlier,

President Bush expressed the same by calling it mission accomplished.⁶ Afghanistan President, Hamid Karzai, expressed satisfaction over the US policy's strategic shift by saying that "we are at a point where we have moved from major combat activity to a period of stability and stabilization and reconstruction activities."⁷ It was an early and premature victory celebration. The initial military success against al Qaeda and the Taliban raised US expectations.⁸ However, ground realities turned out to be different. By 2005, the Taliban resurged and launched an asymmetrical war against US-led coalition forces and the Karzai-led Afghan government by mainly conducting suicide attacks.

Several factors accounted for the Taliban's resurgence and US disappointment subjugating them. First, despite US devastating military offensives, the Taliban before long emerged as a resilient force after taking advantage of local conditions and reorganising themselves. They established local networks comprising fighters and commanders having autonomy in operations.⁹ Second, there was a major tactical shift in their attacks; they followed Iraqi insurgent techniques. Earlier, the Taliban used to battle US forces in open combat that caused them huge losses due to technical inferiority. The use of suicide attacks and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) proved effective and inflicted heavy casualties on US and allied forces. Nearly sixty-four attacks were executed against US forces from January 2005 till August 2006.¹⁰ Third, the Taliban were able to exercise social influence and garner support from the people by using grievances associated with perceived corruption of the Afghan government, lack of social services, and ethnic discrimination against Pashtuns. Furthermore, they capitalized on the historical narrative of foreign occupation of Afghanistan by infidels, such as British, Soviets, and Americans.¹¹ These factors helped the Taliban gain logistic support for the insurrection, marginalise the meagre local administrations, and establish their own administrative arrangements.

There were some additional factors for the Taliban's resurgence. Their comeback turned out to be more manageable due to US parallel military campaign in Iraq since March 2003. In addition, cracks appeared in the US-led coalition regarding troop commitments for Afghanistan. European countries were reluctant to send more soldiers because of the increased violence. They were not mindful of local socio-cultural sensitivities and resulting fallout for their fight against the Taliban. On the one hand, the Bush administration was not ready to accept the Taliban as an inevitable stakeholder for achieving sustainable peace in Afghanistan. On the other hand, its military strategy failed to consider local factors and ground realities. However, the faulty US military strategy was just one factor in its Afghanistan failure. Other factors like state-building policy and political settlement had their own downsides.

b) State-building

After an initial military victory against the Taliban and al Qaeda elements, the US focused on state-building in Afghanistan. The Bonn Agreement, adopted in December 2001, laid out a framework for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. It provided

for adopting a new Constitution and establishing state institutions, notably, a representative government, electoral system, judiciary, security forces, and civil administration.¹² The subsequent international conferences and declarations further consolidated these objectives on Afghanistan.¹³ The US and other donor states and agencies provided rich funding towards realising the state-building goals. The Bush and subsequent US administrations, therefore, made significant achievements. A new constitution was adopted, followed by presidential elections in 2004. Next year, elections for National and Provincial Assemblies were held. Meanwhile, the US spent \$ 88.32 billion over the two decades to build, train, equip, and sustain Afghan national security forces comprising the Afghan national army and police force.¹⁴

Despite colossal spending in state-building, the plan miserably failed in terms of consequences for the US conflict resolution strategy. The primary objective behind the US state-building drive was to establish viable governmental and security infrastructures capable of keeping the Taliban at bay and marginalising their influence in Afghanistan. In the meantime, the successive Afghan governments failed in representing all regions and sections of the society, whereas the Taliban set up parallel administrative systems in rural areas. Likewise, the Afghan security forces could never fight against the Taliban independently. With the US departure from Afghanistan, the Afghan government and national security forces crumbled so quickly as they hardly existed. These facts indicate that the US state-building programme in Afghanistan has severe drawbacks.

First, scholarly literature and empirical evidence show that external efforts for state-building succeed when favourable conditions, such as socio-political institutions, economic development, and social homogeneity, are existed.¹⁵ A case in point is US state-building efforts in Japan and Germany, where the abovementioned conditions pre-existed. On the other hand, state-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan failed due to the non-existence of democratic institutions, poor economic development, and weak social cohesiveness. Afghanistan, highly fragile in 2001, did not have any pre-existing capabilities to build on the state's strength and scope. In short, the policy of transformation of the state's system led to the failure of US state-building efforts in Afghanistan. Precisely, state-building involvement meets its objectives when it follows the approach of building the existing capacities of the target state but fails when based on its transformation. Second, state-building requires a stable and conducive environment to be effective and productive. With the diversion of US strategic focus from military to political side and opening a new military front in Iraq, the Taliban restructured themselves, resulting in scaled violence.¹⁶ The consequent instability undermined the conducive environment required for state-building and reconstruction activities.

Third, the Afghan ruling elite failed in ensuring its representation across provinces and districts as it remained restricted to Kabul and indulged in the power struggle. The local governments could not effectively dispense international aid to the grassroots level because of corruption, patronage clientelism, and lack of connection or

strains with the central government. It indicates that US state-building plan was only focused on the centre while the periphery remained ignored or mishandled. In other words, state-building in Afghanistan became an elite-centred project, and its trickle-down effect on ordinary people could not be realised. Consequently, both Karzai and Ghani governments were considered foreign political impositions and lacked legitimacy. This drawback translated into a strategic advantage to the Taliban.

Strategies of Obama Administration

After assuming power, President Obama reviewed US policy towards Afghanistan and introduced a new approach known as the Af-Pak strategy. The objective was to bring the US intervention in Afghanistan to a logical end. The key features of this strategy were the stabilisation of Afghanistan and Pakistan, elimination of al Qaeda in both neighbouring states, reconciliation with moderate Taliban, and elevating fight against hardcore Taliban while shifting responsibility to Afghan forces, and phase-wise drawdown US forces, by July 2011.

a) *Af-Pak Strategy*

The Af-Pak strategy was a manifestation of the US' new approach to looking at Afghanistan's turbulence from a broader perspective. Pakistan remained a crucial factor in this approach for compelling reasons. The US believed that al Qaeda had safe havens in tribal (border) regions, fuelling terrorism and insurgency. Considering tribal region an epicentre of terrorism, President Obama termed it "the most dangerous place in the world."¹⁷ Pakistan also faced a terrorist surge, especially in the north-western part, resulting in alarming instability. The situation in Pakistan was also adversely affecting the US counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan. Pakistan was viewed as part of both problem and solution. Therefore, the strategy aimed to stabilise Pakistan and build its economic and military capacity to carry out counterinsurgency offensives in the tribal region.

Besides continuing military assistance, the US announced the Kerry-Lugar Bill for Pakistan that committed \$1.5 billion a year over 2010-2014 to address its development and stability challenges.¹⁸ Further, to overcome the trust deficit and promote political, economic, and security convergence between Pakistan and Afghanistan, the strategy provided for trilateral dialogue involving Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the US. The US initiated bilateral strategic dialogue with Pakistan to engage the latter in a comprehensive cooperation framework within the Af-Pak strategy. Meanwhile, the US increased the frequency of drone attacks against al Qaeda and militants in the tribal belt of Pakistan.

However, despite being impressive in its framework, the Af-Pak strategy did not yield desired results as the US-Pakistan relationship soon experienced several frictions. First, Pakistan officials resented the hyphenation of the country with Afghanistan, arguing that the two countries had different conditions and problems. By implication, different policies were required to deal with them. Second, the US-Pakistan

divergence emerged over the scope and targets of the Pakistan military's counterinsurgency operations as reflected in the US 'do more' mantra vis-à-vis Pakistan. While the Pakistan military conducted effective offensives against insurgents in Swat and South Waziristan, it was reluctant to launch a military operation in North Waziristan under the pretext of overstretching and capacity issues. Considering North Waziristan as a significant sanctuary for militants targeting Afghanistan, the US put diplomatic pressure on Pakistan to extend military action to the agency area.

Third, in 2011, US-Pakistan differences turned tense due to disturbing events connected to CIA contractor Raymond Davis, bin Laden's killing, and US troops' attack on a Pakistani check post. These events resulted in the withdrawal of facilities provided by Pakistan for NATO supplies to Afghanistan and a diplomatic strain in the US-Pakistan ties. Lastly, US drone attacks in the tribal region of Pakistan proved highly controversial and counterproductive. Drone strikes caused collateral damage, fear, and anger among the civilian population resulting in anti-Americanism and blowback at local, national, and transnational levels.¹⁹

b) Peace Initiatives

Obama administration realised the limits of its military solution to the Afghan conflict. The constantly increasing Taliban insurgency and resulting casualties manifested shortcomings of the US policy towards Afghanistan. The Obama administration accepted the relevance of the Taliban and shifted its approach from zero-sum to the non-zero-sum outcome of the war. Therefore, President Obama's Afghanistan strategy assured reconciliation with and support those ready to renounce violence.²⁰ In early 2011, US officials held direct negotiations with the Taliban.²¹ Despite intentions to talk with the Taliban, the US maintained a strategic ambiguity to avoid criticism of its Great Power posture. Only President Trump adopted an overt and straightforward position on the US talks with the Taliban.

In January 2012, the Taliban informally opened a political office in Qatar for negotiations with international stakeholders.²² This development came to secure a peace deal with the US, thus paving the way for US-led coalition forces to withdraw from Afghanistan. The opening of the Qatar office was not sudden; the US-Taliban negotiations mediated by Germany and the Qatari Royal Family led to its establishment. The first direct contact between the US and the Taliban occurred in November 2010, when Mullah Omar's representative, Tayyab Agha, met US officials in Munich,²³ followed by a couple of rounds of negotiations in Doha in 2011. The start of talks at the Qatar office was rather pessimistic. Both sides agreed on releasing five Taliban from Guantanamo Bay prison in exchange for an American soldier, Bowe Bergdahl, but the swap could not be implemented.²⁴ The Taliban were not ready to assure that prisoners being released would not participate in combat operations against the US troops.²⁵ The Taliban cancelled talks within two months of its commencement accusing the US of not showing progress on the prisoners' swap, a precondition to move forward.²⁶

The US-Taliban peace talks initiated by the Obama administration were indicative of several realistic trends and outcomes to take place in the coming years. First, the Taliban maintained an explicit position on talks from the outset. They reiterated their willingness to negotiate a political settlement but not with the Afghan government, whose legitimacy was questioned. Second, they took a tough and uncompromising stance on the preconditions of a political settlement. They gave an impression that they were ready for the failure of the talks but not for a compromise on their stance. The Taliban took advantage of US' hurry to exit from Afghanistan throughout the negotiations, knowing that "you have the watches, but we have the time."²⁷ Third, they were negotiating with a powerful position. They constantly increased aggressiveness against the US forces irrespective of the peace talks. Given the Taliban's rigid stance and a zero-sum approach in negotiations, the peace talks failed and remained at an impasse until President Trump undertook the Afghan peace process with a clear-cut objective.

c) *Exit Plan*

The longevity of the US mission in Afghanistan without any tangible outcome and resulting war-weariness put increasing domestic pressure on the US to come out of the endless war. Obama administration devised a two-fold strategy to conclude US military campaign in Afghanistan. One element called for stepping up counter-insurgency operations against insurgents, while the other element provided for shifting the responsibility of Afghanistan's security to national security forces from 2011 onwards. The US' Afghanistan strategy aimed to clear, hold, build and transfer.²⁸

President Obama appointed General Stanley A. McChrystal, having counterinsurgency experience in Iraq, as commander of the US and international security forces in Afghanistan to materialize his military strategy. After a year, General David Petraeus replaced General McChrystal as commander. In addition, 33,000 more troops were deployed in Afghanistan, raising troops level to around 100,000.²⁹ The plan behind this move was to cripple the Taliban, expedite training of Afghan national security forces and hand over the responsibility of Afghanistan's security to them. In November 2010, NATO countries declared to complete the shift of full responsibility of Afghanistan's security to Afghan forces and significant drawdown of international security forces by 2014.³⁰

The US military strategy for Afghanistan had serious shortcomings resulting in an adverse impact on the US future course of action in Afghanistan. Foremost, it proved ineffective because it was time-bound, with timelines and deadlines for the troops surge, troops drawdown, and handing over responsibility to Afghan forces. It gave the Taliban a psychological and military advantage to adjust accordingly. As the US was running short of time, the Taliban boosted both morale and insurgence. President Obama's strategy was more to satisfy domestic public opinion and NATO allies than to consider ground realities in Afghanistan. The second related factor was the hasty decisions made by President Obama to increase and reduce the number of troops in Afghanistan. The

US troops peaked at 100,000 in 2010-11 and less than 10,000 in 2015. If the military solution was a viable option, the sharp decline in troops' presence was an unrealistic move that did not bode well for the US future engagement in Afghanistan. Finally, the US transferred full responsibility for Afghanistan's security to Afghan forces by December 2014, limiting its role to training and military backup support in special operations under Operation Resolute Support. However, Afghan forces could not seriously withstand the Taliban insurgency. This military weakness gradually resulted in the Taliban's advances culminating in complete control over Afghanistan.

US-Taliban Peace Deal under Trump Administration

The US strategy of peace talks with the Taliban that led to its complete departure from Afghanistan in August 2021 was initiated by President Donald Trump. It was the first time two warring parties got engaged solemnly in a political process. Earlier, the US being status-conscious and optimistic for an advantageous deal, was less willing to engage in open and declared negotiations with the Taliban. However, finding itself trapped in an unending war and facing domestic pressure on the cost of war, President Trump was compelled to go into direct negotiations with the Taliban. Trump administration appointed Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-American diplomat, as US representative for peace talks with the Taliban.

Since the beginning of the war in 2001, players involved sought a zero-sum outcome, but they failed and got stuck in an unending war in Afghanistan. The most protracted and ever-expanding violence proved mutually hurting the US and the Taliban. The start of peace negotiations signified the realisation of both sides that a zero-sum approach was not viable to end the war. On February 22, 2020, two sides agreed to a seven-day ceasefire as a precondition to signing a peace deal in Doha.³¹ Finally, on February 29, 2020, the US and the Taliban signed a historic peace deal in Doha. The Afghan government was not happy with the agreement. President Ashraf Ghani rejected the terms of prisoners' exchange; however, he agreed to accept and released nearly five thousand Taliban prisoners in phases later on.³²

The US-Taliban peace deal included the Taliban's counter-operation assurances, US withdrawal from Afghanistan, intra-Afghan negotiations, and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire.³³ It contradicted the ground realities. The Trump administration was criticised for agreeing to favour the Taliban and withdraw troops from Afghanistan. The provision of intra-Afghan negotiations proved a non-starter because the Ghani government took an extreme position, fearing that power-sharing would undermine its authority. Taliban-Ghani's approach to power-sharing was inherently contradictory. President Ghani considered his government constitutional, whereas the Taliban took its pre-9/11 regime as legitimate. Consequently, the objectives of the US-Taliban peace deal, namely intra-Afghan peace agreement and ceasefire, could never come into effect. Hence, the US-Taliban peace talks became a withdrawal deal rather than a peace deal.

US Exit under Biden Administration

President Joe Biden termed the Trump administration's political settlement a 'bad deal' and signalled its review. However, given the complex situation in Afghanistan and limited alternative options, he continued with Zalmay Khalilzad's role to succeed intra-Afghan settlement and materialization of the peace process. Meanwhile, the Taliban rejected any possibility of renegotiating peace and hoped the Biden administration would not deviate from the February 2020-deal. Finally, the Biden administration renounced the idea of reviewing the deal and decided to delay the complete departure from Afghanistan from May to August 2021 and push for an intra-Afghan political deal. The major hurdle in intra-Afghan political settlement came from the Afghan government. President Ashraf Ghani refused to accept any power-sharing formula but presidential and parliamentary elections. He even turned down the proposal for an interim government in Afghanistan put forward by Mr. Khalilzad.³⁴

Despite having no progress on an intra-Afghan political settlement, the Biden administration continued its exit plan. In April 2021, President Biden announced the withdrawal from Afghanistan on August 31, 2021, underlining that it would be secure and orderly.³⁵ However, contrary to the expectations of President Biden, US withdrawal from Afghanistan proved chaotic and humiliating. As the US vacated its central military station, Bagram Airbase, in July 2021, the Taliban advances in various provinces of Afghanistan gained momentum. Proving all political estimates and intelligence reports wrong, the Taliban took control of urban areas with little resistance from Afghan security forces following a two-week blitz. On August 16, 2021, President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, and Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, fell into the control of the Taliban. This unexpected development compelled the US to shut down its Kabul embassy and take control of Kabul airport to steer the emergency evacuation from Afghanistan.

Paradoxically, the 2001-US intervention in Afghanistan ended with a shock and disgrace. The longest two-decade US war cost \$2 trillion, 2,300 troops casualties, and above 20,000 troops injuries.³⁶ Although a considerable amount was spent training and equipping 300,000 Afghan security forces, they collapsed just days after the Taliban takeover. The billion-dollar arsenal belonging to Afghan troops also came under the Taliban's possession following the former's surrender. President Biden and his officials argued that Afghan forces could withstand the Taliban insurgency as they outnumbered Taliban fighters and modern weaponry. However, the Taliban's rapid and sweeping victory defied this argument.

President Biden received criticism and blame for the shameful withdrawal from Afghanistan. He might be held responsible for the mismanagement of US withdrawal, but factors behind Taliban victory against the Ghani government had been evolving for a long. Firstly, the US withdrawal deadlines, from Obama to Biden, always gave a psychological advantage to the Taliban. As the US started military drawdown and consequent transfer of security to Afghan forces, the Taliban's willingness to fight and retake Afghanistan boosted. The military capability of the Taliban convinced the US to

engage them in political negotiations and give them concessions. Both factors led to psychological pressure on the Afghan government and security forces. Secondly, the US-Taliban peace deal under the Trump administration favoured the Taliban politically and militarily. Politically, the agreement set a strict deadline for completing US withdrawal from Afghanistan without realizing the intra-Afghan political settlement. President Ashraf Ghani was reluctant to power-sharing with the Taliban due to a fear of being side-lined. Militarily, the deal established a ceasefire between the US and the Taliban, leaving Afghan forces on their own to fight against the Taliban. With this advantage, the Taliban increased offensives against Afghan security forces, which lost morale because of the preceding factors. What followed was obvious!

Conclusion

The US intervention in Afghanistan lacked clarity and consistency regarding strategic objectives, policies, and associated operations. Initially, military offensives against al Qaeda and the Taliban were highly successful. However, the US diversion of military resources to Iraq in 2003 and its shift from military strategy to state-building allowed the Taliban to reorganise and engage in asymmetrical warfare against US-led coalition forces. Afghanistan's physical and social setting was favourable to the Taliban, being local. Likewise, the US state-building programme in Afghanistan had severe limitations and failed due to the non-existent of democratic institutions, economic development, and social cohesiveness. Further, persistent conflict undermined the conducive environment required for state-building activities. Finally, the Afghan ruling elite failed in ensuring outreach across the country and remained limited to Kabul and indulged in power tussle and corruption.

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