Easier to Get into War Than to Get Out

The Case of Afghanistan

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Note: The research and generation of this report was completed before the Biden Administration announced their decision to withdraw all American troops from Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks.
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A member of the Afghan security forces walks in the sprawling Bagram air base after the American military departed, in Parwan province north of Kabul, Afghanistan, Monday, July 5, 2021.

AP Photo/Rahmat Gul
Executive Summary

The dissolution of the Soviet Union effectively ended the Cold War and left the United States as the most powerful, secure, and prosperous nation in the world. The resulting military superiority, lack of rivals, and vast wealth provided the U.S. with unparalleled freedom to indulge in well-intended global missions to shape the world without seemingly incurring significant risks or consequences. In the 1990s, the U.S. advanced its interests to promote democratic governance and free market economies, foster individual freedom, and protect human rights. However, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. foreign policy focus shifted to combatting and defeating terrorism, predominantly in the Middle East and Africa. These missions would cost nearly $5.4 trillion and approximately 15,000 American lives.1

Unfortunately, the shortcomings of the U.S. war on terror policies over the last twenty years have repeatedly prevented the U.S. from achieving its envisioned outcomes of defeating terrorism and reshaping fragile regions in its own image. The United States’ inability to achieve its desired definition of success in its missions against terrorism has not been due to challenges by more powerful and strategically savvy enemies. Nor has it been due to insufficient expenditure of resources, nor to a lack of war-fighting experience. Instead, the lack of success has been far more due to shortcomings of U.S. foreign policies themselves. They have entangled the U.S. in protracted wars on terror and hindered its ability to secure its own interests in these conflicts.

This paper examines why the U.S. post-Cold War foreign policy has largely been unsuccessful in achieving U.S. objectives while engaged in regional conflicts of terrorism. Using Afghanistan as a case study, this paper identifies the inconsistencies, contradictions, gaps, and poor policy implementations of various U.S. administration policies that have entrenched the nation in prolonged wars against terrorism and undercut the prospects of ending the conflicts responsibly over the last two decades. Lastly, this paper will recommend policies that

would improve the U.S. decisions about where and for what purpose to commit taxpayer dollars, risk American lives and enhance the U.S.'s strategic competence to prevail in future kinetic conflicts, particularly against authoritarian powers and transnational terrorist groups.

While U.S. foreign policy has prevented another large-scale terrorist attack on U.S. soil since September 11, 2001 and simultaneously helping many countries make significant social, political, and economical gains, there remains a school of thought that U.S. policy left many countries worse off, expanded terrorist groups, and resulted in a resurgence of more lethal jihadists. The intention of this paper is not to expand on this perspective of “blame America first.” While there have been flaws in U.S. policies and imperfections in the way that the missions have been carried out, U.S. interventions have resulted in enormous humanitarian, economic, political, and security gains in many countries around the world. But U.S. foreign policy could have performed better. Going forward, it must draw on lessons learned from missions that did not secure U.S. interests in the past in order to be more effective in the future.

The United States remains as one of the world's most powerful and influential countries despite its post-9/11 foreign policy shortcomings. There are numerous underlying factors that prolonged the wars in which the U.S. intervened to defeat terrorism including: (1) Shifting objectives that were not commensurate with the allocated resources; (2) an imbalance of ends, ways, and means; (3) lack of commitment to a long-term strategy; (4) poor implementation of the strategy to achieve objectives; (5) U.S. overconfidence in taking on a large-scale state building efforts without adequate resources and tools; (6) conflicting diplomatic and military policies; (7) flawed assumptions and misjudgments; (8) the tendency to pursue short and mid-term gains in lieu of long-term strategic success; (9) lack of proper understanding the operational environment and the enemy; (10) underestimating of the socio-economic, historical, and cultural features of the invaded state; (11) a desire to build Western-style institutions difficult to sustain in the host nation; (12) A failure to apply lessons learned from other similar missions; and (13) the inability to curb the destructive influences of regional actors.
To account for these lessons from the wars of the past two decades, this paper presents the following policy recommendations to guide the U.S. future decisions about when and how to engage on threats of terrorism abroad. These recommendations must be implemented in an integrated, coherent, and balanced manner such that they would revamp deficiencies of existing strategies and provide a set of U.S. actions that could be less costly in terms of resources and risk to American lives.

1. **Re-envision the Counterterrorism Strategy**—Invest resources to mitigate the consequences of terrorism before a conflict arises. The areas of focus for such counterterrorism strategy should include identifying and prioritizing fragile states whose vulnerabilities pose a significant strategic threat to U.S. interests. Once it has done so, the U.S. should determine whether that state is conducive to assistance and committed to improving its stability. The U.S. should develop trust and a working relationship with the host nation to detect and understand emerging threats and allocate appropriate resources to suppress the threat. The U.S. should work closely with the host nations to identify and eliminate terrorist leaders. Finally, U.S. policy should encourage socioeconomic reforms to embolden the governance of host nations and incentivize the local population to reject the presence of terrorist groups.

2. **Ensure Policies are Based on Hierarchy of National Interest**—The U.S. “whole-of-government” should identify and adopt a common hierarchy of national interests to guide its decisions. These national interests will guide investment decisions in a disciplined and focused way and will help the U.S. avoid trying to address every threat and every conflict. Instead it can trace its goal to an ultimate end, with the ways and means to achieve it defined. This paper recommends the following seven tiers of U.S. national interest to undergird foreign policy decisions: 1) prevent and deter attacks on U.S. homeland, Americans, and allies, 2) protect U.S. democracy at home, 3) prevent proliferation of WMD, especially in regions occupied by rogue states that are controlled or about to be controlled by terrorist groups, 4) establish productive counterterrorism relationships with regional allies, consistent with American national interests, 5) ensure the viability and stability of
major global systems including trade, financial markets, energy and supplies of goods and services, 6) prevent the emergence of major powers that are or could be aggressive toward the U.S., 7) promote human rights, and where feasible democracy. Lastly, the U.S. needs to focus its resources only on the highest priority challenges.

3. **Emphasize and Resource Diplomatic and Economic Instruments of Power**—Although the United States reserves the right to use military force to kill or capture individuals and groups who threaten American interests, diplomatic and economic tools of national power must be thoroughly considered, resourced, and employed. Should the United States decide to use military force in support of foreign policy objectives, the military component of the strategy should be part of an integrated, coherent, and synchronized policy across the U.S. government and with partner nations. U.S. policy should encourage political reforms that establish relevant rules of law, enforce accountability, encourage national unity, and provide for the security and basic needs of the host nation’s citizens. U.S. policy should focus on partnering with the international community to create effective and sustainable economic growth programs such as improving job opportunities, increasing access to some form of health care, advancing the means of transportation by building roads, and enabling means of communication by establishing mobile companies. This means the budgets for those agencies, especially for the U.S. State Department, must be more robust.

4. **Employ Effective Communication Plan**—The U.S. government should adopt a clear strategic messaging and communication strategy whenever it decides to make an important foreign policy decision. International and domestic audiences are important. A clear communication strategy will prevent unnecessary ambiguity and provide consistent messaging to all relevant stakeholders to prevent misunderstandings, increase trust and confidence, and keep the American people aware of the reasons for the sacrifices and investments made during the many wars the United States has engaged in.

5. **Monitor Progress of Policy and Adapt as Needed**—The U.S. foreign policy should put in place mechanisms to monitor and
evaluate the effectiveness of implemented strategies in order to determine whether U.S. objectives are being achieved. If they are not, then the policy must be adjusted to improve future program performance. The policy should include data collection, evaluation and analysis plans, and recommendations from these evaluations. Should the U.S. engage in foreign conflicts, U.S. policy must ensure that assessment and monitoring of progress is being made and communicated to the U.S. Congress and the American public to the extent feasible along with supporting data. Assessments must be clear-eyed, transparent and non-political. Changes in strategy must be made courageously when assessments show policies are no longer working.

6. **Invest in Partner-Focused Regional Security Architecture**—The U.S. policy could pursue regional security architectures, while maintaining minimal military presence that is ready for intervention, if necessary, to protect U.S. interests. These regional security architectures should help the U.S. define its national interests in each region. Each region's architecture must be predicated on promoting shared mutual interests between all stakeholders and leverage the multipolar balance of power, in which regional powers take responsibility and share the burden to deter aggression by rivals. Even though the U.S. has Senate approved alliances with certain countries, while not with others, U.S. policy should actively engage all countries in each region, including those regarded as adversaries. Our national interests align with some nations while they do not with others. The U.S. should seek constructive relationship with all nations in each region while recognizing that our relationship with each country will be unique based on how well our national interests align. This policy is less dependent on U.S. maintenance of balance of power by heavy military presence, military assistance, and arms sales, and more reliant on regional diplomacy.

In summary, the United States must continue to secure its interests globally and employ its military when necessary to protect and defend its homeland and the American people. The U.S. should never forgo its aspirations to expand democracy, reinforce human rights, and promote free market capitalism. To meet our foreign policy objectives, however, the U.S. must exert
effective diplomacy, modestly apply financial aid, employ the U.S. military, as necessary, as part of an integrated and coherent strategy, and ensure that the U.S. civilian and military lines of effort are effectively coordinated. As opposed to engaging the U.S. military as a last resort, U.S. foreign policy must identify the proper military dimension of the threat, and tailor the military dimension of the solution in the context of a more balanced and integrative approach that uses all the tools of national power. When U.S. military force is used, it should be employed in ways that guarantees high probability of success, in accordance with law of armed conflict, and is considered as part of an integrated political as well as military approach. The U.S. foreign policy must recognize America’s limits with humility based on its current restrained resource environment, emerging global threats, and rising challenges inside and outside its borders.

While U.S. foreign policy shifts towards addressing the Great Power Competition, terrorist organizations continue to present a persistent threat to U.S. national interests. Lack of U.S. involvement in staging conflicts against terrorism could increase the chances they could spin out of control and become a costly threat to U.S. interests. The U.S. should certainly not engage in every conflict around the world, however, it must systematically assess the consequences of its inaction to U.S. core values and interests. The U.S. should accept with humility its inability to fully eliminate terrorism. Specifically, U.S. policy must balance “ends, ways, and means;” establish clear and achievable objectives; adopt efficient, effective, and resource-sustainable strategies; ensure synchronization of diplomatic and military efforts; build alliances to share the burden of countering terrorism; and leverage cooperative mechanisms and regional partnerships to increase the capacity and willingness of regional states to defend their sovereignty and contribute to multinational coalitions against terrorism. A balanced, integrated, and synchronized strategy encompassing defense, diplomacy, economic, and humanitarian assistance lines of effort should be cornerstone of a revamped foreign policy in the coming decades.
1. U.S. Foreign Policy Post-Cold War

The defeat of the Soviet Union in the Cold War left the United States with unprecedented and unchallenged power and primacy. In the succeeding decades, the U.S. chose to utilize that power in manner that broke the pattern of the foreign policy of the previous decades. Many policy analysts contend that the primary focus of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War was to defend the West. However, after post dissolution of the Soviet Union, U.S. foreign policy focused on expansion of Western ideologies, and well-intentioned sociopolitical transformation and governance efforts of other countries. The terrorist attacks of September 11 2001 further shaped U.S. foreign policy in the decades that followed as counterterrorism efforts became the nation’s highest priority.

Although the military missions prior to 9/11 in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo were initially intended to provide humanitarian aid, military interventions post 9/11 were aimed to defend the United States and protect it from another catastrophic terrorist attack. Post 9/11 interventions evolved into political, economic, and societal transformations of foreign states. The vast military and economic power, and the absence of a threatening rival empowered U.S. foreign policy to embark in variety of well-intended missions. The U.S. foreign policy sought to protect human rights and rescue other countries, such as in the case of the Gulf War of 1991, and expanded initially established war missions to attempt to make other countries democratic states in places where U.S. vital interests were not always at stake.

The course of U.S. foreign policy since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 entangled the U.S. in numerous protracted and exhausting wars against terrorism that have failed to achieve the U.S. desired end-states, despite isolated successes and the exception of preventing another 9/11, can

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be attributed to the repeating common errors. The U.S. foreign policy
became focused on addressing the world’s terrorism threats in order to
prevent the recurrence of another 9/11 attack on the United States. To do
so, Washington embarked on missions to topple corrupt leaders, remedy
causes of transnational terrorism, democratize fragile states, secure ungov-
erned spaces vulnerable to becoming terrorist safe havens, and establish
western-style institutions. Washington remains entangled many global
wars on terror without a definite end.

This paper examines a case to identify errors in U.S. policies in a war
against terrorism that has largely been unsuccessful. Using Afghanistan as
a case study, this paper identifies the inconsistencies, contradictions, gaps,
and poor implementations of various U.S. Administration’s policies that
have entrenched the U.S. in a protracted two decade war against terrorism
without securing its interests and achieving its envisioned goals. This paper
will recommend policies that would improve U.S.’s strategic competence to
prevail in future wars, especially against authoritarian powers and transna-
tional terrorist groups.

While U.S. foreign policy has prevented another large-scale terrorist
attack on U.S. soil after 9/11, there is a school of thought that believes that
U.S. policy left many countries worse off, expanded terrorist groups, and
resulted in a resurgence of more violent and lethal jihadists. Expanding
on this perspective of “blame America first” is not the intention of this
paper. While there were flaws in U.S. policy and imperfections in the way
that the missions have been carried out, U.S. interventions have resulted in
enormous humanitarian, economic, political, and security gains in many
countries around the world.
1.1 The Importance of Lessons Learned from Post 9/11 U.S. Policy

The most imperative reason to draw lessons learned from U.S. foreign policy that entangled U.S. in exhaustive and prolonged, costly, open-ended wars on terror without achieving its mission is to prevent future costly and protracted wars that deplete our capacity to advance and secure our national interests. Identifying flaws, failures, and mistakes will enable policy makers to make more effective decisions to achieve political and military objectives in line with U.S. interests in future conflicts, definitively attain mission success, and honor America’s sacrifices. Given that defeating terrorism has proven to be impossible, reforming U.S. policy to mitigate their consequences on the United States and its allies is the only long-term solution.

Further, improving U.S. war on terror policies based on lessons learned will improve their performance, lead to the desired U.S. outcomes, and avoid further tarnishing of America’s reputation, credibility, and competence to shape world events. Despite trillions of dollars spent and thousands of lives lost, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars served to erode the U.S. military’s reputation as a competent force. The U.S. was unable to permanently destroy terrorist organizations with inferior and unsophisticated weaponry or symmetric capabilities. These organizations won the battle for hearts and minds through superior use of media and propaganda. They proved quite astute in financing their operations and fighting a world power.

Additionally, it is important to identify, and correct policy flaws to ensure that future applications of such policies do not worsen global problems. Flaws in U.S policy since the terrorist attack of 9/11 are viewed by some to have aggravated certain problems. There is wide perception among many Americans that opposition to U.S. policy has driven anti-Americanism, deterioration in worldwide democracy, fueled civil wars, and expanded extremist ideologies.⁵ Lastly, applying lessons learned to reform U.S. foreign policy is critical to boost and maintain the confidence of U.S. allies.

and partners in U.S. ability to succeed in deterring aggression and winning wars. Severed relationship with allies could result in a shift in the balance of power and influence away from the United States to authoritarian regimes.6

1.2 Factors that Shifted U.S. Foreign Policy Post-Cold War Shift

Three decades ago, several factors created the conditions for a shift in U.S. foreign policy. These included the lack of threatening rivals after the collapse of the Soviet Union, prosperity, and the U.S. pursuit of the grand liberal hegemony strategy. The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in a unipolar world whose superpower emerged to be the unchallenged United States. U.S. military superiority, lack of rivals, and vast wealth gave the U.S. unparalleled freedom to indulge in global missions.7 America’s dominance was based on its military, diplomatic, political and economic instruments, which enabled it to be the only country that could afford to decisively intervene in any conflict in the world.8 Due to its vast power, prosperity, and influence, the U.S. embarked on military interventions, which many times led to efforts to transform other countries to be consistent with US interests politically, economically, and domestically.9

Additionally, there is a widely held belief that U.S primacy made it possible for each post-Cold War administration to pursue a flawed grand strategy of Liberal Hegemony. This based U.S. and world security and prosperity on a western liberal world order. While Liberal Hegemony has had the best of intentions to expand liberal ideals, promote democratic governance, free market economy, foster individual freedom, and protect human rights, it is viewed to have resulted in a mix of success and repeated setbacks.10 For

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example, in Somalia in 1993, the mission of the U.S. military evolved from providing humanitarian relief for starving refugees into a state-building exercise, in which the military became directly involved in the internal politics of a fragile state.\textsuperscript{11} Many U.S. policy observers believe that liberal hegemony has eroded the U.S.'s relationship with Russia \textsuperscript{12}, trapped the U.S. in open-ended costly wars against terrorism, intensified violence in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and gave rise to more resilient and lethal violent extremist groups such as ISIS, and expanded regional instability.\textsuperscript{13}

With no viable alternative to Western support, Asian and European allies were content adhering to U.S. hegemony.\textsuperscript{14} In the absence of the Soviet Union, most developing countries turned to the liberal international system of alliance and institutions led by the U.S. for security, economic goods, and political support. With such primacy, wealth, and influence, the U.S. established ambitious goals to shape the world without significant risk or consequences. In the absence of threatening rivals, no one could stop the United States. Unfortunately, U.S. foreign policy successes have not been commensurate with its vast power, which will be explored in the next 2 chapters.


\textsuperscript{12} Stephen Walt, \textit{The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy}, 14.

\textsuperscript{13} United States Institute of Peace, “Preventing Extremism in Fragile States,” 11.

2. **U.S. Interventions in Wars on Terror**

2.1 Inefficacies of U.S. Foreign Policy in Addressing Global Terrorism Post 9/11

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, U.S. foreign policy has committed America to address important yet open-ended regional terrorism problems with no definable end point. Since 2001, the United States military has conducted combat operations in 24 different countries, spent nearly $5.5 trillion on terrorism wars, lost or injured more than 60,000 Americans, often with no end in sight. Despite the hefty price-tag, U.S. foreign policy has not delivered on the goals it established for these various missions. Instead terrorism organizations expanded. The number of global violent Islamic terrorist groups alone almost quadrupled between 2001 and 2018. Today, 77% of conflicts in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, and the Sahel have a violent extremist element, compared with 22% in 2001. Despite all the money, time and lives lost, the U.S. has failed across multiple U.S. administrations at securing its long-term strategic objectives in the wars against terrorism.

International terrorism picked up momentum in the 1990s and has continued to thrive and expand in the 2000s and beyond. Increased hostility was made evident by the 1993 World Trade Center attack, the 1996 Khobar Towers dormitory attack in Saudi, the 1998 U.S. embassies attacks in Tanzania, Kenya, and the 2000 USS Cole in Yemen. However, other than a few short-term retaliatory missile strikes, the Clinton administration’s foreign policy did not develop an effective long-term response to address the underlying drivers of the terrorist movement. Subsequent administration’s policies in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001
achieved initial tactical combat success by quickly defeating the Taliban, then diminishing Al-Qaeda’s base of operations in Afghanistan, and subsequently killing Osama Bin Laden. However, Al-Qaeda reconsolidated over the years, the Afghan government remains incapable of securing its own territory without extensive military and economic support from the U.S. and the international community. The U.S. achieved success initially in Iraq in 2003 by toppling the Saddam Hussein regime. However, despite tactical success, the U.S. continues to remain invested in Iraq.

The number of terrorist attacks worldwide has escalated, too, although with mixed success. Examples include the Times Square attempted bombing in New York City in 2010, the New York subway system thwarted attacked in 2009, the attack stopped by Spanish authorities targeted at the Barcelona metro system in 2008, the London subway system in 2005 killing 52 civilians, the Madrid train system in 2004 killing 191 civilians, the Bali bombings in 2002 and many more plots known and unknown to the general public.19

Shortcomings of U.S. policy hindered the U.S.’s ability to successfully achieve the objectives of its missions in other countries including Somalia, Yemen, Syria, and Libya, where the war on terror continues, and in some nation states has resulted in unintended negative consequences. Although U.S. intervention in Somalia is not directly responsible for the resurgence of Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab, it also did not prevent these extremist groups for reemerging. U.S. support to Saudi-led intervention in Yemen is viewed to have contributing to the civil war and creating safe havens for radical extremist groups including Al-Qaeda. Overthrowing Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, despite him surrendering his Weapons of Mass Destruction, bred more violence, instability, and created war zones in which extremist groups made sanctuaries. Despite good intentions, the US foreign policy is viewed to have failed to stabilize those states, spread democracy or enforce world order ultimately leading to substantial re-growth and expansion in terrorist networks.20


2.2 Features of U.S. Policy to Address Terrorism Post 9/11

Post 9/11, a prominent feature of U.S. foreign policy has been to strengthen fragile states through economic, social, and political development efforts, and to utilize all tools of national power to counter violent ideologies. In 2008, former Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice said that, “It is clear that managing problems of state failure and ungoverned spaces will be a feature of U.S. foreign policy for the foreseeable future—whether we like it or not.”21 The 2002 National Security Strategy noted that America is threatened more by failing states and less by conquering states.22 Over the last two decades, U.S. foreign policy has focused on reducing terrorist threats from fragile states and transforming the internal affairs of other countries to align with American interests.23 Several U.S leaders and policy makers have come to view winning on the battlefield to be inadequate in achieving strategic victory. As a result, over the years since the attack on Sept 11, 2001, the U.S. military has engaged in non-warfighting roles such as assisting with institution building, promoting development of governments, developing rules and laws, and facilitating economic and social development. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates clearly made this point when he said that “military success is not sufficient to win: economic development, institution-building, and the rule of law, promoting internal reconciliation, good governance, provided basic services… along with security are essential ingredients for success.”24

Policies articulated in Presidential documents focus on the importance of security and state building to combat extremism, the precursor to terrorism. Given that violence breeds instability, policies set forth by the White House and other government agencies recognize the importance of security as a prerequisite to stability. President Obama’s 2013 Presidential Policy Directive 23 (PPD-23), Security Sector Assistance, warned against societal instability and committed the U.S. to help partner nations build sustainable

23 Mandelbaum, Mission Failure, 5.
capacity to address common security challenges, specifically to disrupt and defeat transnational threats. The 2015 National Security Strategy emphasizes that America will prioritize actions to confront aggression and terrorism, help build the capacity of the most vulnerable states to defeat terrorists, and seize opportunities to shape the economic order. The 2017 National Security Strategy built upon the previous version and reinforced that the U.S. “will take action against terrorist networks…support efforts to counter violent ideologies and increase respect for the dignity of individuals…[help] our partners achieve a stable and prosperous region…assist regional partners in strengthening their institutions and capabilities.”

The policies set forth by the Department of Defense (DoD) also recognize the importance of security as a prerequisite to stability. Defense policies over the last 20 years integrated other statecraft tools such as diplomacy and economic development to achieve defense objectives. The 2018 National Defense Strategy reinforced the notion of leveraging multiple instruments of national power to secure America’s interest by stating that, “to succeed, we must harness and integrate all aspects of national power and work closely with a wide range of allies, friends, and partners…our strategy seeks to build the capacity of fragile or vulnerable partners to withstand internal threats and external aggression.”

The 2018 National Defense Strategy recognizes the importance of a strategic approach that integrates “multiple elements of national power—diplomacy, information, economics, finance, intelligence, law enforcement, and military” to defend Americans, our values, and interests.

The foreign and defense policies that every administration post-Cold War pursued have performed poorly and have entangled the U.S. in missions in which the U.S. repeatedly failed to secure all its interests due to numerous shortcomings that will be explored in the next chapter. These shortcomings range from lack of clear and objective goals, to mission creep with inadequately resourced strategies, to insufficiently coordinated interagency and international efforts, and beyond.

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3. The Case of Afghanistan

Using Afghanistan as a case study, this chapter will illustrate the shortcomings, gaps and errors in U.S. foreign policy that have hampered the U.S.'s ability to achieve its objectives in the war in Afghanistan. Although some of the effort and investment that the United States made was squandered, there have been much economic, social, civil, and political gains in Afghanistan over the last 20 years because of U.S sacrifices. While acknowledging these gains, this section will examine errors in U.S. policy, flaws in the U.S. leadership decisions, incorrect assumptions, erroneous predispositions, and other fundamental factors that hindered the United States from definitively achieving its intended end-state.

The attack of September 11, 2001 had a profound impact on the course of United States’ foreign policy. For the first time since the Cold War, the U.S. engaged its military, economic, and diplomatic tools in the South Asia region. The two-decade war in Afghanistan is widely viewed as one of the many U.S. foreign policy failures since the Cold-War. Washington has spent close to $1 trillion on the war, more than 2,300 U.S. military personnel have lost their lives, while more than 20,000 others have been wounded. Approximately half a million Afghans have also been killed or wounded.

The United States strategies in Afghanistan over the course of Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump’s administrations have consistently focused on defeating Al Qaeda and preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists with global reach. While the U.S. achieved its initial vital goal of decimating Al-Qaeda and degrading its ability to use Afghanistan as a safe haven to attack the United States again, the Taliban and other terrorist groups subsequently regained strength and continued to present threats to U.S. interests. Given these threats, U.S. foreign policy continues to pursue counterterrorism and counterinsurgency missions, invest in political reform and economic development in order to achieve its mission in Afghanistan on acceptable terms with U.S. interests.

30 Mandelbaum, Mission Failure, 6.
Currently, Washington's objectives in Afghanistan as codified in the 2017 National Security Strategy and the 2019 U.S. South and Central Asia Joint Regional Strategy remain as preventing terrorist organizations from using Afghanistan to attack the U.S. homeland, its citizens, and allies abroad. The U.S. pursues this objective by facilitating an inclusive political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban to end the conflict and ensure that Afghanistan no longer serves as a haven for international terrorism.\(^\text{33}\) U.S. policy lays out the following objectives to support achieving an enduring Afghan political settlement that will foster stability in Afghanistan and in the greater South and Central Asia region:\(^\text{34}\)

1. Engage with regional powers to encourage them to help Afghanistan achieve a peaceful settlement to the conflict:
   - Support local-level reconciliation and reintegration of Taliban insurgents.
   - Reduce the capabilities of destabilizing terrorist proxies.

2. Promote a stable, inclusive, and democratic Afghan government that resists ethnic fracture, governs accountably, and upholds the rights of women.

3. Build Afghanistan’s economy and increase its economic integration within the region to help ensure its economic viability and promote better relations with its neighbors.

It is imperative to analyze and identify policy shortcomings that have repeatedly entangled the U.S. in prolonged counterterrorism missions. These policies must be revamped based on drawn lessons to avoid costly, protracted, and failed missions in the future. This chapter will identify the inconsistencies, contradictions, and disconnect of Washington's policies, decision-making, resourcing, and implementation challenges that have entrenched the U.S. in a costly 20-year mission in Afghanistan.

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\(^{34}\) U.S. State Department, “South Central Asia Joint Regional Strategy,” 18–19.
3.1 U.S. Failures in Afghanistan

Inconsistent and Shifting Objectives

Consistent objectives are necessary for mission success and stability within Afghanistan. Unfortunately, U.S. objectives across the military, diplomatic, and development agencies were not always clear nor consistent, leading ultimately to mission failure and an unwinnable situation. Over last two decades, the U.S.’s mission and objectives in Afghanistan significantly evolved over the course of three political administrations, multiple military commanders, and several Afghan governments. The rationale for invading Afghanistan was initially narrowly established- to destroy Al-Qaeda, topple the Taliban, and prevent the occurrence of another attack on the U.S. and its allies. Following the initial success of overthrowing the Taliban regime in 2001 and defeating Al-Qaeda, the U.S. mission in Afghanistan expanded as it established new objectives beyond its original counterterrorism goal.

The longer the United States remained in Afghanistan, the more ambiguous the goals and strategy became.\(^{35}\) The U.S. recognized that in order to prevent the insurgency of al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, the Afghan government must be stable enough to provide security and basic services, and violence must significantly be reduced to foster economic, political, and social opportunities. As a result, U.S. undertook missions of state-building and social engineering. However, America’s objectives to restructure the domestic affairs of Afghanistan, while war-fighting an adaptable and regenerative enemy in a country shattered by four decades of war, without a consistent, clear, adequately resourced, long-term strategy, and the support of the American people was mission impossible and destined to fail.\(^{36}\) The result has been an unwinnable war with no easy way out.\(^{37}\)

Despite acknowledgement by U.S. policy analysts that U.S. foreign policy has been overly ambitious, too involved in the internal affairs of other


\(^{36}\) Mandelbaum, Mission Failure, 11.

countries, and excessively focused on promoting American values and Western ideologies, each administration continued to pursue them over the last two decades. The goals and mission continuously morphed amongst different U.S. officials within the White House, the Pentagon, and the State Department. Some U.S. officials intended to use the war to transform Afghanistan into a democracy, others wanted to transform the Afghan society, and then there were those who wanted to reshape the regional balance of power among Pakistan, India, Iran and Russia.

In the end, mission creep, unclear and ever shifting objectives have contributed to a protracted war, that lost the support of most American citizens.

**Inconsistent and Shifting Policy**

The previous section described inconsistencies of national objectives in Afghanistan over the last 20 years, however, the policy to achieve those objectives and the implementation strategies have also been deficient and faulty. Years of incoherent, inconsistent, and shifting U.S policy with an unfocused mission resulted in a resurgence of Taliban, Al-Qaeda and other Islamic Jihadists and ultimately prolonged the war in Afghanistan. Shortcomings of U.S. policy were also evident by the underfunded and fragmented construction efforts in early years. When former U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, announced that, “we’re at a point where we clearly have moved from major combat activity to a period of stability and stabilization and reconstruction activities,” the U.S. and other nations began large-scale investment for state-building in Afghanistan. Ironically, the policies, plans, and programs for such effort was ill-conceived, misguided, inadequately resourced, and inconsistent. Institution building efforts were incoherently split among NATO nations, with each sponsoring the development of individual ministries. Money was pouring

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40 Craig Whitlock, “Stranded without a Strategy.”
at unsustainable rates beyond what the Afghan economy and institutions had the capacity to absorb, resulting in large scale corruption and theft.\(^{42}\) These U.S. policy flaws provided the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and other terrorist groups time and space to rebuild capacity and strength.\(^{43}\)

While initially militarily successful at defeating the Taliban, the original U.S. strategy in Afghanistan was characterized as a “light approach,” which had significant disadvantages. A small footprint of U.S. Special Operating Forces along with CIA operators, with the support of U.S. airpower and anti-Taliban militias, left U.S. forces with inadequate personnel to move around the country to collect intelligence and to attack the enemy in a deteriorating security environment.\(^{44}\) Further, this “light approach” left U.S. commanders with insufficient troops to block terrorist escape routes, and to detect and destroy their sanctuaries.\(^{45}\) Those elements of the strategy that aimed to collapse the Taliban and Al-Qaeda by denying them their source of resources and support were not adequately resourced and were prematurely abandoned.

U.S. strategy for Afghanistan has shifted from a time-based approach during the Obama administration to a condition-based approach in the beginning of the Trump administration, and reverted back to a time-based approach by the end of the Trump administration, which compounded the challenges of winning the war and thus prolonged the war in Afghanistan.\(^{46}\) In 2009, President Obama announced a new strategy linking success in Afghanistan to a stable Pakistan, increasing aid to Pakistan to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its safe havens. The new strategy also escalated the mission in Afghanistan, surged troop levels, and established a time frame for troop drawdown, while negotiating a peace deal with the Taliban who were previously viewed as the enemy.\(^{47}\) The Obama administration shifted from Bush’s counterterrorism strategy

\(^{45}\) McMaster, Battlegrounds, 165.
to a compromise between counterinsurgency and counterterrorism policy comprised of 150,000 U.S. and NATO troops and an increase in foreign financial assistance to the Afghan government that was unable to absorb and deploy those funds.\(^48\)

While the Obama administration policy put limitations and restrictions on how the military engaged, the Trump administration shifted strategy by rejecting state-building, authorized deployment of as many as 7,000 more U.S. forces, expanded targeting authorities and allowed use of airstrikes to support Afghan ground forces.\(^49\) President Trump shifted policy at the end of his administration and abandoned his initial commitment to support the Afghan government in fighting the Taliban, and his Administration gave conflicting signals about the extent to which the Taliban is fulfilling its commitments to disassociate from Al Qaeda.\(^50\) The shifting policies and lack of coordinated approaches further strengthened and emboldened adversaries, in some cases putting dollars meant as reconstruction aid into their hands by corrupt means.

Moreover, frequent pronouncements that the U.S. military would withdraw without outcome-based timelines undermined the commitment of U.S. allies and other international partners to the mission. Such announcements signaled doubt about the dependability and commitment of the United States to the mission, embolden the Taliban, destabilize the Afghan government, and allow terrorist groups to reconsolidate. For example, the Trump administration announcement to abruptly withdraw U.S. troops in 2020 also undercut the diplomatic efforts to negotiate peace between the Afghan government and the Taliban.\(^51\) Additionally, U.S. policy initially sought to degrade and to weaken Taliban, but later shifted to declare the Taliban a partner and not the enemy. As a result, the Taliban emboldened, seized control of more territory, and escalated attacks against Afghan

\(^{48}\) Mandelbaum, Mission Failure, 181.


security forces and civilians. In the last two decades, U.S. policy diverted its attention from the Taliban to Al-Qaeda in Pakistan, and incorrectly assumed that the same Pakistan who provides sanctuary to dozens of terrorist groups would be a counterterrorism partner in defeating Al-Qaeda. Wishful and inaccurate thinking by the U.S. that the Taliban is uninvolved with other terrorist organizations, or that they would not collaborate or coordinate with other terrorists diminished the America’s willpower to achieve mission objectives.

**Imbalance of Ends, Ways, and Means**

The imbalance between the objectives sought and the resources allocated have had a significant negative impact on the U.S.’s ability to achieve its established political and military goals in Afghanistan. Failure to achieve strategic goals is often attributed to the imbalance between one or more variables of a strategy: ends, ways, means, and the security landscape in which that strategy is employed. One of the main reasons the U.S. is still involved in Afghanistan is due to a loss of equilibrium between the “ends” sought and the “ways” and “means” allocated to achieve those ends. The initial “end” that the U.S. pursued in Afghanistan was to prevent a catastrophic attack from Afghanistan on U.S. homeland by eliminating the Al Qaeda. Since the Taliban supported Al Qaeda, the U.S. mission expanded to take down the Taliban and put in place an Afghan government that would not permit Al Qaeda’s return. This was an expansion of the “end” that grew into an over ambitious state-building effort that was not sufficiently planned, coordinated, and resourced. The “ways” by which the U.S. pursued achieving its “ends” in Afghanistan also evolved over time into a combination of counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency missions. It included a whole-of-government approach that was not always coherent, aligned, and coordinated within the U.S. institutions and across coalition partners. Lastly, the United States underestimated the “means” required to achieve its ambitious objectives, and thus did not commit the adequate

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52 McMaster, Battlegrounds, 175.
resources in a timely manner to build a stable and secure Afghanistan that can secure its own territory and boarders.⁵⁴

U.S. policy makers, military, and civilians failed to assess the vitality of a stable Afghan government at the onset of military victory over the Taliban, and therefore failed to direct the necessary effort to achieve sustainable political and economic outcomes. The U.S. strategy in Afghanistan was left under resourced in critical early years of the war. The Taliban and Al-Qaeda were regenerating and building strength while the U.S. got preoccupied with the Iraq war, draining most of its attention and resources.⁵⁵ It took a year after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan before sufficient funds were committed to building U.S security forces.⁵⁶ Recruitment, training and building of the Afghan security forces were scarce and slow resulting in the inability to stop Taliban attacks.⁵⁷ The U.S. lacked a clear, cohesive, adequately resourced, and long term, post-Taliban strategy in the early stages of the war.

Due to limitations of civilians’ deployment in sufficient numbers into unstable regions, the U.S. military stepped in to fill the state-building “means” void since the appropriate means were not provided. The U.S. military’s role expanded from combat operations to a broader foreign policy role. By the mid-2000s, increases in U.S. and coalition assistance resulted in substantial progress in state-building efforts, although many Provincial Reconstruction Teams lacked development expertise.⁵⁸ The ends were identified, but the correct means were not provided, leading to military personnel—untrained in state-building and institution forming activities—to attempt to fill the gap. Former Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes once said that “the [American] military can do enormous things. It can win wars and stabilize conflicts. But the military can’t create a political culture or build a society.”⁵⁹ As the U.S. and its allies were at the height

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⁵⁴ Craig Whitlock, “Stranded without a Strategy.”
⁵⁷ Mandelbaum, Mission Failure, 166.
of political success in 2005, the American government decided to cut the
requested foreign assistance for Afghanistan by 38 percent and reduce
troop levels by 3,000. The result was the resurgence of the Taliban, escalat-
tion of violence, and further seizure of Afghan territory. Recalibration of
ends, ways, and means is necessary as conditions change to provide ade-
quate and appropriate resources for the cycle. Failure to recalibrate ends,
ways, and means by U.S. led to a failure in the mission.

NATO’s “ends,” “ways,” and “means” were also imbalanced. NATO com-
manders believed that despite the array of tactics, there was no coherent
long-term strategy in Afghanistan. British General David Richards once
told former Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld that “We don’t have
enough troops and resources and we’ve raised expectations.” A lot of
what the U.S. and NATO forces did in Afghanistan was reacting to condi-
tions on the ground instead of being proactive to a coherent longer-term
strategic plan.

In summary, inconsistent U.S. policies, policy shortcomings, and an
imbalance of ends, ways, and means all contributed to the failures in
Afghanistan. The next section will cover how some of the inherent U.S.
challenges related to coordination of U.S. institutions, impaired intelli-
gence gathering and sharing, and flawed assumptions contributed to the
Afghanistan failure.

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60 Mandelbaum, Mission Failure, 165.
61 Craig Whitlock, “Stranded without a Strategy.”
3.2 Inherent U.S. Challenges

U.S. Institutional Shortcomings

Washington’s inability to end the prolonged 20-year war in Afghanistan on acceptable terms with U.S. national interest is attributed to numerous hurdles inherent to the siloed nature, culture, and dynamics of separate U.S. institutions. Diplomatic and military efforts have been disconnected and at times in conflict. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reported that lack of clear command-and-control relationship between the U.S. military and the U.S. State Department hindered security assistance efforts. This lack of clear interagency leadership proved to be a significant factor in contributing to the failure of the U.S. in establishing Afghanistan as a viable and secure state.

In Washington, military and civilian agencies adopted policies to synchronize interagency stabilization programming, however in Afghanistan, agencies did not operate in concert with one another. Unification of actions across the different interagency strategies was a challenge in that diplomatic, military, and intelligence stovepipes stifled coordinated decision making. U.S. military commanders found it difficult to link their military plans with those of the State Department and USAIDs. Due to its large budget and footprint, the U.S. military determined priorities on the ground without proper advance coordination, compelling civilian agencies to conduct their efforts in regions that were unready for stabilization programs. Another example of how this lack of coordination played out dates back to 2009 when diplomatic and military activities were diametrically opposed. During the Obama administration, the diplomatic foreign policy arm began peace negotiations with the Taliban and relabeled them as no longer an enemy, at the

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64 Reveron, Exporting Security, 56.

same time that the military arm was planning for a surge to combat them on the battlefield.\footnote{66}{"Clinton Extends Hand to Taliban," July 16, 2009, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2009-07-16/clinton-extends-hand-to-taliban/1355022.} As a result of this diplomatic approach, the U.S. military had to curb offensive operations against the Taliban. The consequence was that as offensive operations against the Taliban reduced, the Taliban gained more territory, expanded insider attacks, intensified mass attacks on Afghan civilians and security forces, and perpetrated more attacks on U.S. forces with assistance from Pakistan’s intelligence arm.\footnote{67}{McMaster, Battlegrounds, 174.} The effort also undercut the Afghan government’s legitimacy and bolstered the Taliban to increase attacks on Afghan security forces and police, and eroded trust between Afghan and U.S. forces.

Personnel and resource deficits due to fast scaling, short personnel deployment tours, and the pressure to make quick progress resulted in challenges that also hindered stabilization programs.\footnote{68}{Sopko, “Lessons Learned from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan.”} Many key U.S. programs were either understaffed, lacked appropriately trained staff, experienced rapid staff turnover, or underused capable local staff. As a result, programs did not achieve desired outcomes. Further, stabilization programs that lacked appropriate staffing did not identify nor report the requirements for.\footnote{69}{Iyengar, Shapiro, and Hegarty, “Lessons Learned from Stabilization Initiatives in Afghanistan: A Systematic Review of Existing Research” (RAND Corporation, 2017), 31.} Differences in civilian and military objectives, timeframes, and culture is believed to have resulted in a range of inefficiencies and conflicting activities. For example, when U.S. troop end-strength reduced, civilian personnel presence was reduced concomitantly mirroring the military’s withdrawal schedule, which undercut oversight and the sustainability of the reconstruction and development projects.\footnote{70}{Iyengar, Shapiro, and Hegarty, 29.}

Additionally, different agencies within the U.S. government have different degrees of strategic and tactical risk tolerance, which prompted policy-makers to continue pursuing ineffective strategies because the unknown risks of withdrawing outweighed the known risks of staying. The rise of the
Islamic State in Iraq following the U.S. withdrawal in 2011 made policy-makers even more risk averse with respect to Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{71}

There may have been missed opportunities in the onset of the war that could have resulted in a successful end to the war. The Taliban tried negotiating a peace deal, which included disarming themselves and recognizing Karzai as Afghanistan’s leader, however the Bush administrations shot down that opportunity. By not accepting that deal, an Afghan government was established without involvement from key Taliban leaders who had expressed interest in being part of the solution. The Washington Post has revealed that “key Taliban leaders were interested in giving the new system a chance, but we didn’t give them a chance.” Khalilzad acknowledged that by refusing to talk to the Taliban, the Bush administration may have blown a chance to end the war shortly after it started.\textsuperscript{72}

\textit{Impaired Intelligence Gathering and Sharing}

U.S. Foreign Policy was hampered by lack of intelligence gathering and sharing, which in turn lead to poor insights into enemy motivation and activities, exasperated other shortcomings of the U.S. foreign policy, and contributed to the protracted war in Afghanistan. National and military intelligence in Afghanistan to support effective decision making was initially scant and not actionable.\textsuperscript{73} Terrorist militant resurged by exploiting the gap in U.S. intelligence and mounted deadly attacks on Afghan civilians and troops.\textsuperscript{74} Lack of timely and adequate intelligence hindered the U.S.’s ability to know the Taliban’s motivations and objectives until almost a decade into the war.

The U.S. may have considered diplomatic negotiations much earlier with the Taliban if they had sufficient actionable intelligence early on. Limited


\textsuperscript{72} Craig Whitlock, “Stranded without a Strategy.”

\textsuperscript{73} Sopko, “Lessons Learned from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan,” 11.

intelligence led U.S. officials to incorrectly perceive that the Taliban possessed only military objectives, when in fact they also possess political and social motivations.\textsuperscript{75} Frequent changes in U.S. ambassadors to Afghanistan, commanders, troops, and their civilian counterparts resulted in information and intelligence gaps. Moreover, access to needed information and intelligence was impeded due to U.S. diplomats mostly staying within the U.S. compounds to avoid casualty risk. U.S. military officials viewed this risk aversion approach crippling in information acquisition.\textsuperscript{76}

\textit{Flawed Assumptions, Baseless Predispositions, and Misjudgments}

Many ineffective and erroneous U.S. foreign policy decisions have been made because of incorrect assumptions, misjudgments, biases, and unsupported inclinations, which have contributed to the prolonged Afghanistan war. To begin with, civilian and military leaders tend to default to a strategy that placed combat operation first and diplomacy second, assuming that once the enemy is killed, the situation will be better.\textsuperscript{77} Quick tactical and operational wins would generate overconfidence in efficacy of military power and incline U.S. officials to repeatedly default to the same short-term military approach that would fail to achieve strategic success over the long term. Such predilections have led to troop surges, expansion of Afghan security forces, and shaped the U.S. policy to heavily rely on military solutions.

In addition, the U.S. misjudged that more resources spent on schools, bridges, canals and other civil-works projects would lead to faster improvements in Afghan security.\textsuperscript{78} Unfortunately, further economic assistance generated more corruption and fraud due to the inability of the Afghan institutions to absorb the resources. The surge in U.S. military personnel and subsequent combat operations between 2009 and 2012 generated more

\textsuperscript{75} Waldman, “System Failure,” 838.
\textsuperscript{76} Waldman, 830.
\textsuperscript{77} Waldman, 835.
Taliban fighters. The tendency of U.S. officials to use “sunk cost” as justification to perpetually reinforce and implement policies that are based on flawed assumptions inhibited Washington from making the necessary policy modification to achieve its long-term strategic objectives.

Moreover, many policy makers and Americans incorrectly assume that U.S. occupation in Afghanistan is resisted both by Afghans and the Taliban, which is prolonging the war. However, U.S. occupation in Afghanistan is only resisted by the Taliban, who are now deemed a U.S. partner. The government of Afghanistan and most of its people want the U.S. and its coalition partners to remain and continue their effort to support establishment of a self-sufficient government that can protect the people of Afghanistan from the brutalities of terrorist groups.

Further, the author of this paper believes that the U.S. incorrectly assumes that the Taliban could be a constructive force in Afghanistan and that it would cut ties with Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Negotiating peace with the Taliban, who have assisted Al-Qaeda in heinously taking the lives of thousands of Americans on September 11, 2001, and who brutally tortured and killed thousands of innocent Afghan people, will draw-out the war even longer. Other U.S. officials also believe that U.S. policy incorrectly assumes that the Taliban cannot be trusted as a negotiation peace partner, and that they are untrustworthy and intertwined with Al-Qaeda and other terrorist group in the region.

The assumption that the Taliban would negotiate with the Afghan government in good faith and end their violence and brutality on Afghan citizens is already proving incorrect because violence and attacks on Afghans in Afghanistan has escalated. Additionally, U.S. policy naively and incor-

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80 McMaster, Battlegrounds, 180.


82 McMaster, Battlegrounds, 159.

rectly assumes that Pakistan would end its support for the Taliban and other transnational terrorist groups, based on U.S. diplomatic request and economic assistance. Pakistan will not reduce or end its support for jihadist extremist groups. It uses these group as its foreign policy arm to develop strategic depth in regions like Afghanistan to advance its national interests.\(^8^4\)

These are just two examples of incorrect assumptions that lead to flawed decisions, and to U.S. policy failures.

**U.S. Domestic Politics**

Domestic political motivation around presidential election cycles has played a significant role in U.S. policy errors in Afghanistan. U.S. officials have used U.S. Presidential election timelines as drivers of timelines for the reevaluation of Afghanistan policy. For example, President Obama’s decision to surge troops was in part driven by the timing of the 2012 presidential election. If he had proposed to withdraw troops, Obama would have appeared weak and would have risked the election.\(^8^5\) Similarly, the premature announcement of troop withdrawal by candidates running for office to gain votes also undercut U.S. strategy in Afghanistan by giving the Taliban and other terrorist organizations advanced notice of American plans.\(^8^6\)

**Counterterrorism Strategy Limitations**

The U.S. counterterrorism strategy in Afghanistan has had limited success due to being reactive to the threat of violence, focusing on short-term objectives, lacking a long-term terrorism prevention strategy, and providing inadequate resources to secure the country due to the “light footprint” approach in the initial years of the war. U.S. policy lacked a proactive preventative strategy that would stop spread of violent extremism, slow

\(^8^4\) McMaster, Battlegrounds, 213.
\(^8^5\) Mandelbaum, Mission Failure, 179.
\(^8^6\) Waldman, “System Failure,” 841.
the emergence of new terrorist groups, and make the fragile state more resilient against the threat of transnational jihadist. Preventing the regeneration of terrorist group has not been a focus or priority of U.S. policy. Therefore, as the U.S. destroyed and defeated violent extremist groups, new ones emerged, more violence spread, and the war on terror continued to expand. Adopting a proactive policy would complement the counterterrorism policy by supplementing a short-term, reactive focus on defeating the terrorism threat with a longer-term objective to prevent extremism.

Lack of Willpower and Understanding of the Nature of the War

Two decades of war in Afghanistan, with no ending in sight, has diminished the willpower of U.S. leadership and the American public to stay committed to the mission. Little sustained effort was made by U.S. officials at home to build an understanding and legitimacy for the investment of American blood and treasure. Consequently, Americans have not understood what the U.S. should achieve in Afghanistan, why they should achieve such outcomes, and what strategies would deliver the result at an acceptable cost. According to Pew Research Center poll, 58 percent of veterans believed that it was not worth fighting the war in Afghanistan any longer, while 49 percent of Americans believed that the United States had mostly failed to achieve its goals in Afghanistan. Additionally, 61 percent of the Afghan people believed that the country was moving in the wrong direction.\(^87\) The former National Security Advisor, Lt. General H.R. McMaster, best stated that “the loss of will to sustain the war in Afghanistan led to rationalization of the decision to withdraw and the resurrection of the flaws and contradictions that undercut U.S. policy there almost from the start.”\(^88\) The media covered the war only when there were casualties without proper context. Most Americans viewed the war in Afghanistan as unimportant because they were unaffected by the war or they lacked familiarity with Afghanistan. Americans have become skeptical of investing treasure and blood in Afghanistan because of what they have already invested has not brought satisfactory results.\(^89\)

\(^{87}\) Magsamen and Fuchs, “The Case for a New U.S. Relationship with Afghanistan.”

\(^{88}\) McMaster, Battlegrounds, 216.

\(^{89}\) Mandelbaum, Mission Failure, 184.
Lack of Knowing the Enemy

Not knowing who to trust or who is friend or foe compounded U.S. policy failures. At the war’s outset, U.S. troops did not know whether the enemy was al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or the array of other jihadist extremists. Furthermore, U.S. officials were unsure whether Pakistan was friend or foe. Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once stated that “I have no visibility into who the bad guys are.”\(^90\) Initially, the Taliban was perceived to be “backward” and “medieval.” However, they proved to be capable strategic planners, with efficient leadership quick to exploit their adversaries’ weaknesses, and manage a vast intelligence network.\(^91\)

Further, the U.S. pursuit to mediate between the Taliban and the Afghan government is based on the assumption that the Taliban can become a benign organization and halt their support of Al-Qaeda and other jihadist terrorist organization if they could share power over governing Afghanistan. However, others view the Taliban as an untrustworthy, inhumane, ruthless, misogynistic organization intertwined with Al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups, with loyalty to elements of the Pakistani Army.\(^92\) After all, the Taliban allowed Osama Bin Laden to settle and operate out of Afghanistan.\(^93\) The Taliban’s status as friend or foe remains an open question. The Obama administration viewed the U.S. goal to be the dismantlement and defeat of al-Qaeda. However General Stanley McChrystal’s draft strategic review did not even mention al-Qaeda, as if Al-Qaeda were no longer the problem.\(^94\) Further, many Afghans that the U.S. considered allies were later deemed to be unreliable and corrupt warlords. The Karzai administration appointed warlords to political positions across Afghan institutions because it had no better alternatives. The result was insurgencies, massive corruption, and a fraudulent government.\(^95\) To this day, the problem persists of how to deter-


\(^{93}\) Mandelbaum, Mission Failure, 161.

\(^{94}\) Craig Whitlock, “Stranded without a Strategy.”

\(^{95}\) Mandelbaum, Mission Failure, 169.
mine who is friend and who is foe, who is trustworthy or who is not. This is true even for the Afghan people.

In summary, inherent U.S. challenges, including flawed assumptions, poor intelligence sharing, institutional shortcomings, paucity of domestic communication strategy fostering national willpower, and the lack of knowing who the enemy was/is all contributed to the U.S. Foreign Policy Failures in Afghanistan. The next section will describe how conditions unique to Afghanistan further contributed to the failure of U.S. Foreign Policy in the war on terror in Afghanistan.

3.3 Challenges Inherent to Afghanistan Hampered U.S. Foreign Policy Effectiveness

Lack of Fundamental Understanding of Afghanistan

The United States lack a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the social, cultural, political, and economic devastation the decades of war had wreaked on Afghanistan. Despite the social, political, and humanitarian gains due to significant U.S. investment since 2001, the two and a half decades of war had torn the fabric of Afghan society between the Soviet invasion and the overthrow of the Taliban. The U.S.’s attempt to perform large-scale state-building on a country from an extremely low base proved to be challenging. The country also suffered from years of Taliban authoritarian rule that severely restricted education, especially for women, destroyed infrastructure, and escalated poverty. U.S. foreign policy underestimated the impact of decades of war that had left Afghanistan fragile, impoverished with a collapsed economy, failed institutions, and tribalism. Americans could not communicate in native Afghan languages, did not have a grasp of the myriad of tribes and ethnicities, local

98 Mandelbaum, Mission Failure, 160.
authorities and allegiances, and therefore they did not know who to work with and whom to trust.  

Despite efforts to build expertise on Afghanistan through initiatives such as DoD’s Afghanistan-Pakistan (AfPak) Hands Program, U.S. officials believed that experts who had contextual understanding of Afghan history, politics, social, tribal, and religious affairs were insufficient from the outset. Shortcomings of the DoD’s AfPak Hands program is viewed as having limited the development and deployment of experts in Afghan languages and culture. The program was perceived to be career-limiting and therefore was unable to recruit enough qualified volunteers. Lastly, rotation of members of the AfPak Hands program into and out of theater hindered the ability to retain institutional knowledge and fully leverage relationships and networks that were built. This deficiency hampered the U.S.’s ability to understand and assess information and intelligence. U.S. officials have observed that teams of top U.S. commanders such as General McChrystal or General Petraeus had spent very little time in Afghanistan, and many were appointed due to their biases toward military-led counter-insurgency operations.

**Weak Afghan Institutions and Leadership**

Some U.S. policy analysts claim that U.S. failures in foreign lands are a result of shortcomings of U.S. foreign policy as much as it is of the cultures of the countries America sought to remake. The underlying dynamics of the Afghan leadership and institutions are widely characterized as pervasively corrupt, with weak governance, and unreliable leaders, whose agenda at times opposed that of the U.S. These factors have compounded U.S.

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policy deficiencies and hindered the progress of the U.S. mission. Afghan ministries lacked qualified and honest officials. Significant corruption within the Afghan government was evident by treating the Afghan people poorly, instigating insurgencies on innocent Afghans, launching raids on mistaken targets, stealing land, disarming tribes, handing out government jobs to cronies, and misleading U.S. military officials into targeting their political rivals. Weak institutions and leadership, along with corruption and lack of the rule of law left Afghans seeking protection and resources from the Taliban and other terrorist groups.\textsuperscript{105} This led to the resurgence of the Taliban, and exasperated efforts to reconstruct a unified, stable, postwar Afghan society. By allowing corruption to fester, U.S. officials contributed to the illegitimacy of the fragile Afghan government they were assisting and advising.\textsuperscript{106} Both U.S. and Afghan officials turned a blind eye to corruption, which strengthened corrupt leaders, criminal networks, and terrorist organization, while simultaneously undermining the safety, security, and prosperity of the Afghan people.

One potential reason why U.S. policy failed to address the challenge of corruption is because anticorruption measures might have fractured relationships with groups that provided intelligence. Further, many U.S. officials and policy makers believed that corruption was inherent to Afghanistan, as opposed to the result of political dynamics.\textsuperscript{107} These views deterred them from enforcing necessary reforms to strengthen accountability and transparency in Afghan institutions.

Increased funding for development and reconstruction that Afghan institutions were unable to absorb often exacerbated the conflict, enabled corruption, and bolstered support for insurgents.\textsuperscript{108} The lack of effective institutions resulted in squander of much of the aid, and even worse, put it in the hands of America’s enemies.\textsuperscript{109} A great deal of the U.S. assistance was misused, wasted, and exploited by corrupt and incompetent

\textsuperscript{105} Armitage, Berger, and Markey, 24.
\textsuperscript{107} McMaster, \textit{Battlegrounds}, 166.
\textsuperscript{109} Stephen Walt, \textit{The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy}, 83.
power-holders. For example, much of the resources that the U.S. military was paying the Afghan security firms to protect the supply convoys were being shared with the Taliban in return for assurance of safe passage. Since the U.S. defense and foreign policies did not hold the Afghan government accountable, the necessary reforms to prevent squandering of billions of dollars of U.S. economic aid were not undertaken.

During Karzai’s administration in Afghanistan, lack of trust between U.S. and Afghan leaders further challenged the already ineffective U.S. strategies. Over time his relationship with the U.S. deteriorated and the corruption across many Afghan institutes were attributed to his political and personal shortcomings. Karzai’s failures contributed to many of America's mission failures. Karzai permitted corruption at scales that enriched his family and many of his allies. As awareness of the theft of the influx of foreign assistance intended for other purposes was disclosed, many Afghans become less supportive of the American sponsored Karzai regime and turned sympathetic to the Taliban. Lack of trust compelled the Afghan leadership under the Karzai administration to question America’s dependability and staying power. The U.S. relationship with the Afghan government further strained as U.S. leadership began to view the Afghan government as part of the problem. Karzai continued to undermine the U.S.-Afghan relationship after his presidency and contributed to the ineffectiveness of the U.S. strategy by legitimizing the flawed American assumptions about the Taliban and the nature of the war.

In sum, dishonest Afghan leadership together with corrupt and mismanaged institutions have compounded U.S. policy deficiencies resulting in the U.S. inability to achieve successful outcomes in accordance with U.S. goals in the region.

112 Mandelbaum, Mission Failure, 168.
113 Mandelbaum, Mission Failure, 171.
114 McMaster, Battlegrounds, 180.
Afghan Security Institution Vulnerabilities

The late planning, inadequate coordination and oversight, and a lack of a sustainable funding program that the U.S. foreign policy exhibited contributed to a continuation of vulnerabilities and weaknesses within Afghan Security forces to secure Afghanistan. Despite years of U.S. and coalition investment, support, and training, the Afghan security forces have remained vulnerable and have struggled to defeat the Taliban and other resurging terrorist groups due to significant deficiencies in skills, capabilities and high attrition rates.\textsuperscript{115} Afghan commanders pocketed U.S. taxpayer dollars that were intended for the salaries of tens of thousands of Afghan soldiers who were ghosted.\textsuperscript{116} Corruption and mismanagement within the Afghan National Security Forces undercut the effectiveness of the U.S. and coalition assistance program and compelled Afghans to turn to the Taliban for protection and security.

The U.S. policy toward developing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) was implemented late because initially the U.S. focused on military operations and failed to properly plan and develop a national security force post-conflict in Afghanistan. Security Sector Assistance (SSA) development activities were under resourced and the early security-force design plan lacked critical capabilities, including aviation, intelligence, force management, and special forces.\textsuperscript{117} The U.S. Congress has appropriated more than $88.3 billion as of December 31, 2020 to provide security in Afghanistan, with nearly $4 billion spent in fiscal year 2019.\textsuperscript{118} Sustaining such a high budget is difficult for Washington over time and too large for the Afghan government to foot on its own.\textsuperscript{119} Ultimately, the military that America built for Afghanistan is

\begin{small}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Waldman, “System Failure,” 829.
\item Michael Mandelbaum, Mission Failure, 12.
\item Armitage, Berger, and Markey, “U.S. Strategy for Pakistan and Afghanistan,” 112.
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\end{small}
difficult for Afghans alone to sustain and would collapse without enduring and significant American assistance.\footnote{120} Moreover, ANDSF is constructed to mirror a western military, which is unsustainable without significant long-term foreign assistance and perhaps the U.S. and coalition presence to continue to train and equip. It is structured to rely heavily on airpower and specialized training, with a promotion system like that of the American military. The U.S. military spent years training tactical units, dependent on U.S. logistical support and airpower. The Taliban on the other hand continuously gained ground and strength using tactics and methods that did not rely on western capabilities. Provision of advanced weapons to a force that is largely uneducated and in some cases illiterate without appropriate training and institutional infrastructure created long-term fiscal and training dependencies.\footnote{121} It may not be suitable for the military of a fragile country with over a 70% poverty rate and corrupt institutions that highly depend on foreign investments to operate to mirror the militaries of advanced and prosperous countries such as the United States.

Although the security assistance activities were conducted multilaterally under a NATO-led coalition, coordination of the effort was incoherent among U.S. agencies and coalition members. Within the U.S., multiple agencies and services were responsible for developing ANDSF’s capabilities, however no single U.S. executive branch department or military service had full ownership of key mission components, oversight responsibility, or accountability for deploying experts to accomplish the mission.\footnote{122} U.S. policy failure to optimize and synchronize coalition nations’ capabilities and resources under an agreed-upon framework undermined the security development mission in Afghanistan. Late planning, oversight, and long-term approach to creating a sustainable ANDSF was a key factor in U.S. policy failure.


\footnotetext{122}{Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), 14.}
In summary, a lack of understanding and planning to counteract weak Afghan leadership, a vulnerable Afghan security apparatus, a lack of design for a security apparatus appropriate for Afghanistan to sustain, and decades of devastation to Afghanistan’s social, economic cultural and political institutions all played meaningful roles into U.S. foreign policy failures.

3.4 Unstable Coalition of Allies

During the 20-year war in Afghanistan, inconsistent U.S. policy aggravated the coalition’s coherence, and cast doubts on the U.S.’s commitment to the mission. The impression that the U.S. is on the verge of exiting Afghanistan and that it lacked willpower to see the war through triggered partner nations to become reluctant to commit long-term to the mission.\textsuperscript{123} The vacillations and unilateral moves undermined confidence from U.S. allies, and exacerbated the policy failure.

Thirty-nine nations supported the U.S. in a coalition to fight terrorists and stabilize Afghanistan in various capacities. A unilateral U.S. withdrawal without proper coordination with NATO, would leave allied partners scrambling, and undercut or even end NATO operations in the country because NATO is reliant on U.S. personnel, airpower logistical capabilities, and infrastructure. For example, the Trump administration’s unilateral decision to drop troop levels to 2,500 before the beginning of the Biden administration resulted in further tension and disappointment from NATO leadership. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that “We went into Afghanistan together. And when the time is right, we should leave together in a coordinated and orderly way. But at the same time, the price for leaving too soon or in an uncoordinated way could be very high.”\textsuperscript{124}

Moreover, inconsistencies of U.S. policy were not the only source of tension between the U.S. and NATO allies. Many NATO members placed caveats on how and where their forces could be used, which impeded unity of effort. To ensure effectiveness of the security force mission in Afghanistan,

\textsuperscript{123} McMaster, Battlegrounds, 170.

the U.S. compensated for coalition staffing shortfalls, resource constraints, and caveats.\textsuperscript{125} The lack of an agreed-upon framework, consistent commitment, and solid coordination between the U.S. and NATO partners led to an inefficient and complex implementation of security force assistance program.

3.5 Pakistan’s Poisonous Influence

Pakistan’s influence on the Afghan government and its pursuit of its own long-term interest undermined Afghanistan’s relationship with the U.S and posed significant challenges in securing U.S. objectives. Afghan and U.S. officials have long believed that Pakistan harbors insurgents and provides haven and support for terrorist groups who are committing violence in Afghanistan. The terrorist ecosystem fostered by Pakistan has resulted in over twenty terrorist organizations between Afghanistan and Pakistan and has provided the Taliban funding, safe havens, training camps, war planning advice, and Afghani refugees as recruits for terrorist organizations.\textsuperscript{126} It is little surprise that Pakistan provided shelter to Osama Bin Laden in Islamabad, the same city as its Military Academy.\textsuperscript{127}

In the immediate aftermath of September 11, Pakistan provided support to the U.S. in the form of supply routes, intelligence, and covert authorization of American drone strikes against terrorists. However, from 2005 onward, Pakistan limited its cooperation since the resurgence of the Taliban that would be friendly toward Pakistan and unsympathetic toward India was in Pakistan’s strategic interest. The Taliban-affiliated Haqqani network is viewed as a virtual arm of the Pakistani intelligence, sponsoring insurgency against which the U.S. military was fighting.\textsuperscript{128} Therefore, Pakistan’s policy of self-interest was hindering the U.S. from achieving its goals in Afghanistan.

\textsuperscript{126} McMaster, Battlegrounds, 156.
\textsuperscript{127} Mandelbaum, Mission Failure, 171.
\textsuperscript{128} Mandelbaum, 175.
Pakistan further capitalized on the growing mistrust between the U.S. and the Afghan government and drove a wedge between Karzai and the Obama administration. Afghan President Karzai’s aides consistently provided inaccurate and false information about who was under the influence of Pakistan’s ISI. Pakistan had Karzai convinced that the United States is not a trusted partner, and that the U.S. has ulterior motives beyond defeating terrorist groups in Afghanistan. Karzai reacted by restricting U.S. military operations, especially night raids, that had previously served to reduce risk to U.S. troops and their Afghan counterparts.\(^{129}\)

In summary, inconsistent objectives and policies, unbalanced efforts, weakened alliances, Pakistan’s poisonous influence, and specific challenges within the U.S. and Afghanistan all added to the degree of difficulty the U.S. faced in securing its objective on the battlefield and the postwar state-building activities. The next chapter will briefly cover three other cases of similarly flawed U.S. foreign policy in wars on terrorism to underscore the importance of learning from past policy errors to avoid repeating them in the future.

\(^{129}\) McMaster, Battlegrounds, 180.
4. Parallel Policy Shortfalls in Other Wars

Afghanistan is not an isolated case. This chapter will touch on three other cases in which a similar policy approaches led to inability to achieve mission success. The inability to learn lessons from other prolonged and costly wars against terrorism could be catastrophic to the future of U.S. foreign policy. America must make every effort to learn lessons from the failures of the wars on terror and apply those lessons to prevent “repetition of national security disasters, commonly referred to as history repeating itself.”

**Iraq.** Many of the U.S. policy pitfalls of the war in Afghanistan were repeated in the Iraq war resulting in a protracted war where the United States has yet to complete its mission. Repetitive policy failures include but are not limited to a series of faulty assumptions and biases, lack of timely and adequate intelligence, inadequate long-term resourcing, and poor interagency coordination. Inaccurate intelligence resulted in there being no Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), the state of Iraqi infrastructure being in disastrous condition that assumed requiring billions of dollars for reconstruction, and the Iraqi police and military being corrupt and ill trained. As in Afghanistan, gaps in U.S. policy after toppling Saddam Hussein resulted in a security vacuum followed by a political vacuum. That in turn resulted in a state of lawlessness and deteriorated security situation. Despite successes on the battlefield, U.S. policy lacked sufficient postwar planning. Lack of a stable political post-Saddam government gave rise to sectarian violence, insurgencies, and consolidation of terrorist groups. After the turnover of power to Iraqis, there was no legitimate post-war government or head of state to properly govern the country, which enabled terrorist groups to exploit sectarian tension and violence. Building a democratic Iraq proved to be difficult and costly.

Like the situation in Afghanistan, the U.S. and the coalition were unable to put enough security forces on the ground to provide adequate local security, enabling reconstruction, defeating the insurgents, or protecting the

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population. Civilian-Military decision-making was viewed to be fractured due to civilians not understanding military strategy and needs, while senior military officials did not understand U.S.’s interagency decision-making processes. Intelligence collection and sharing to inform decision-making in a timely manner was impaired and often unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{132} In both Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. policy underestimated that regime change requires a long-term strategy that is well resourced to bring stability and foster reconstruction. Furthermore, the U.S. policy to withdraw its troops in the midst of the deteriorating conditions created a leadership vacuum which contributed to the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014 and worsened the violence.\textsuperscript{133}

Despite initial U.S. successes to topple the Saddam regime and defeat insurgencies in Iraq, U.S. policy committed some of the same errors that had been present in Afghanistan with an under-resourced and under-planned postwar program.

\textbf{Libya.} In Iraq and Afghanistan, insufficient pre-war and post-war planned interventions have demonstrated to be consequential and costly. U.S. intervention of Libya in 2011 is another example of similar policy failure.

U.S. policy repeated the same mistakes from Iraq and Afghanistan by agreeing with NATO to expand the humanitarian mission from protecting eastern Libyans from the forces of Libyan President Muammar al-Qaddafi to toppling the regime. U.S. and NATO defaulted to the use of military force and rejected the pursuit of diplomacy to perhaps reach a feasible political arrangement with the Libyan government. Moreover, the U.S. failed to assess whether core U.S. interests were threatened and align its actions accordingly. Given that Qaddafi had relinquished his nuclear program, the U.S. had no vital interest at stake to oust the regime. Consequently, the collapse of Qaddafi’s government put thousands of weapons from his arsenal into the hands of terrorist groups across Africa and the Middle East, ignited the Libyan civil war in 2014 that is still


\textsuperscript{133} Stephen Walt, \textit{The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy}, 37.
ongoing, gave rise to ISIS in the country, as well as enabling U.S. adversaries including Russia to exert influence in determining Libya's future.\textsuperscript{134}

Another repeated U.S. policy error similar to those exhibited in Iraq and Afghanistan was the failure to plan properly for a working post-Qaddafi Libyan government. Although the U.S. did provide some economic, political, and humanitarian assistance to Libya post-Qaddafi to develop a new constitution, build a transparent judicial system, improve financial governance, and promote economic growth, the funding was insufficient and poorly executed similar to the war in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{135} Expansion of the mission beyond the original objective, lack of a stabilizing post-Qaddafi government, and a mismatch between resources and nonmilitary efforts resulted in a fragile and unstable Libya that was ultimately exploited by terrorist groups and neighboring states.

**Yemen.** Like in Afghanistan and Iraq, there has been parallel U.S. policy flaws in Yemen’s complex and protracted civil war. Over the course of the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations, U.S. objectives and policy in Yemen appear to have shifted, which have affected the prospects of ending the conflict. Saudi Arabia sought U.S. support when it intervened in Yemen in March of 2015 with the intentions to defeat the Houthis, an Iran-backed government opposition, which it saw as a threat to its interests. Although reluctant, the Obama administration agreed to the narrow objectives of providing logistical and intelligence support to help its Arab partners to defend Saudi’s border and to protect Yemen’s government.\textsuperscript{136} Furthermore, the Obama administration abstained from direct military action, but it committed to counterterrorism mission to thwart threats posed by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).\textsuperscript{137} The Saudi-led

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  \item \textsuperscript{137} Whitehouse, “Statement by NSC Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan on the Situation in Yemen.”
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intervention of the already fragile nation further crippled Yemen's economy and exacerbated the humanitarian crisis. In 2018, the U.S. State Department expanded U.S. objectives in Yemen, which in turn expanded the U.S. mission in Yemen. The new U.S. objectives included 1) supporting an UN-mediated resolution to the war, 2) strengthening Yemeni economic stabilization and institutional capacity, and 3) emboldening Yemen's military and security sector.\footnote{U.S. State Department, “Integrated Country Strategy—Yemen” (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of State, September 10, 2018), 2, \url{https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/ICS-Yemen_UNCLASS_508.pdf}.} Given that the U.S. was withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan, and attempting to end wars, the threat to U.S. soil and Americans emanating from Yemen was not significant enough for the U.S. to venture into another war where its mission creeped once again.

The U.S.’s policy toward Yemen has shifted over the last three Presidential administration and is currently focused on fostering a political resolution to the conflict and alleviating the humanitarian crisis. The Biden Administration revoked the Trump Administration’s terrorism designations of the Houthis, ended support to Saudi-led coalition offensive operations, and is reassessing the sales of U.S. weapons to Saudi Arabia.\footnote{Jeremy M Sharp, “Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention” (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, March 12, 2021), 2.} The Biden administration also enlisted a special envoy to Yemen in order to emphasize the need for a diplomatic end to the conflict over a military solution.\footnote{John Hursh, “Leaving the War in Yemen: The Mostly Good, the Bad, and the Muddled,” Just Security, February 12, 2021, \url{https://www.justsecurity.org/74753/leaving-the-war-in-yemen-the-mostly-good-the-bad-and-the-muddled/}.} The U.S. engaged in Yemen not so much to defend itself from threats emerging from that country, but to defend Saudi Arabia from Iran-backed militia on its southern border. Therefore, in order to improve its relationship with Saudi and other Gulf nations, the U.S. policy implicated the nation in a war where no U.S. vital interests were at stake.\footnote{Malley and Pomper, “Accomplice to Carnage.”} It was hubris to assume quick victory over a resilient anti-government militia, while suppressing the threat of terrorism emerging from Yemen with limited logistics support. Despite lessons from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that defeating an insurgency quickly was going to be difficult, the U.S. became entangled yet in another an open-ended conflict where its objectives evolved, and its policy shifted.
In summary, the cases of Iraq, Libya, and Yemen serve to underscore how broad and ambiguous missions, along with poor planning and insufficient resources, can trap the U.S. military in open-ended occupations. Overambitious aspirations such permanent defeat of terrorism is unattainable, unmeasurable, and ill-defined. A light-footprint of service members tasked to topple a government by weaponizing opposition forces in unstable war-torn countries that are exploited by U.S. adversaries and terrorist organizations is a recipe for policy and strategy failure. Furthermore, these policy errors lead to a waste of U.S. taxpayer dollars, a tragic loss of American lives, and give rise to anti-Americanism and the emergence of new terrorist groups. Learning lessons from these situations so that the U.S. does not repeat these past errors is an imperative.
5. Policy Recommendations

U.S. policy to invade Afghanistan was warranted since the United States was responding to the catastrophic terrorist attacks of 9/11. The United State did not have time to apply diplomacy or partner-building in the region beforehand. However, the lessons drawn from flaws of the U.S. policy in the war in Afghanistan do apply to other missions over the next two decades. The recommendations provided are intended to cost less than operationalizing the U.S. military over an indefinite period of time to various regions with little chance of success. To meet our foreign policy objectives, this paper strongly encourages that the U.S. must exert effective diplomacy, modestly apply financial aid and employ the U.S. military, as necessary. All should be part of an integrated and coherent strategy to ensure that the U.S. civilian and military lines of effort are effectively coordinated. As opposed to engaging the U.S. military as a last resort, U.S. foreign policy must identify the proper military dimension of each threat, and tailor the military dimension of the solution as balanced and integrative way as possible, using other tools of national power. The military should be employed in way that guarantee a high probability of success, in accordance with law of armed conflict, and is integrated to an overall political and military approach. Overall, the U.S. should focus on reducing the impact of terrorism or accept with humility its inability to terminally eliminate terrorism.

5.1 Re-envision Counterterrorism Strategy

Historically, U.S. policy has allocated counterterrorism resources to active terrorism troubled regions and shifted resources to other combat theaters in the war as the war on terror has emerged. The devoted counterterrorism resources tend to come after the conflict has arisen, requiring kinetic intervention that is costly and has unintended consequences. A revamped counterterrorism policy would focus on non-kinetic lines of effort to prevent emergence and impact of terrorist threats to U.S. interests, unless a 9/11-like attack warrants direct intervention. The reformed policy must suppress the rise of conflict before it manifests through the following lines of effort:
1. **Identify and Prioritize Fragile States**: U.S. policy should identify and prioritize fragile countries whose vulnerabilities pose a significant strategic threat to U.S. interests, and determine whether that state is conducive and committed to long-term partnerships with the U.S. and the international community to improve its stability.

2. **Develop Trust**: U.S. should develop working relationship with the host nation to detect and understand emerging threats, allocate analytical and operational resources to increase U.S. regional expertise, training of locals, and help the host nation acquire indigenous intelligence and security capabilities to suppress the threat.

3. **Eliminate Terrorist Leaders**: U.S. should work closely with the host nations to identify terrorist leaders in the state and greater region and capture or kill those leaders or neutralize them.

4. **Employ Socio Economic Reforms**: Given that terrorists exploit fragile states with weak governances, U.S. policy should focus on socioeconomic reforms to embolden the governance of host nations and incentivize the local population to reject the presence of terrorist groups. Ways to empower the locals to deny terrorists safe havens are by leveraging credible leaders and local officials to educate them in not believing the extreme and inaccurate terrorist ideologies and narratives; provide security, employment, and economic opportunities to prevent locals from turning to terrorist groups for protection; and immediately intervene in communities where intelligence indicates that radicalization is spreading.

5. **Secure Long-Term Funding and Interagency Cooperation**: Executive Branch and Congress should identify a prioritized list of fragile states who are vulnerable to terrorism, and provide long-term funding and required authorities to U.S. diplomatic, development, and defense agencies to address factors that spawn terrorism include poor economies, weak governance, regions awash in weapons, and disproportionate cohort of young, unemployed males who are easily recruited for a terrorist cause. Congress and the Executive Branch should establish clear roles and responsibilities of each department and promote long-term coordination between agencies for undertaking extremist prevention.
6. **Prevent Extremism at the Root**: U.S. policy in each fragile and vulnerable state should be underpinned by an overarching regional diplomacy strategy. The objectives of the strategy should be to engage allies and partners, and regional states; pressure other countries to play a neutral or constructive role; lay the foundation for integration of the host nation into the region socially, economically, politically, and in the security realm. The U.S. should encourage regional states to take active measures to help the terrorist infested state disrupt and destroy terrorist organization and activities through regional counterterrorism alliances, promote tolerance of the U.S. military presence in the region as necessary, adopt a regional diplomatic architecture in which it can communicate its messages, address interests of other countries, and resolve differences.

5.2 **Policy Based on Hierarchy of National Interests**

The U.S. should adopt a strategic framework that guides its decisions on whether to intervene in foreign conflicts based on prioritized list of national interests. This framework would be based on a hierarchy of national interests that is viewed to be a disciplined and focused way to help the U.S. avoid addressing every threat and every conflict, and trace the goal to an ultimate end, with ways and means defined. A hierarchal policy framework will assist U.S. officials to make more effective and informed decisions about which ends are worthy of taxpayer dollars and American lives sacrificed.

This paper recommends the following seven tiers of U.S. national interest to undergird foreign policy decisions: 1) prevent and deter attacks on U.S. homeland, Americans, and allies, 2) protect U.S. democracy, 3) prevent proliferation of WMD, especially in regions occupied by rogue states that are controlled or about to be controlled by terrorist groups, 4) establish productive counterterrorism relationships with allies, consistent with American national interests, 5) ensure the viability and stability of major

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global systems including trade, financial markets, energy and supplies of goods and services, 6) prevent the emergence of major powers that are or could be aggressive toward the U.S., 7) promote human rights, and where feasible democracy.

When a conflict or crisis emerges, if a large number of interests are affected, and the consequences of impacts on those interests are significant, policymakers should expend more resources to protect them. For vital interests at stake, the use of force is justified, even at the greater cost in treasure and blood. The policy framework can consist of a different set of national interests; however, it is important to have an explicit hierarchy in order to bring discipline to decisions about foreign policy, and reasoned judgement in selecting appropriate instruments of national power.

5.3 Emphasize Diplomatic and Economic Instruments of Power

The Post-Cold war period is viewed as an overmilitarized period in U.S. history.\textsuperscript{143} Going forward, U.S. foreign policy should predominantly leverage nonmilitary tools to resolve conflicts and employ the military when our vital interests have been threatened or attacked. Should the United States decide to intervene in a conflict in foreign lands, defense, diplomatic, and economic policies must be synchronized, integrated, and employed coherently across the U.S. government and international agencies.

\textit{Employ Effective Diplomatic Initiatives First}

Diplomacy is an important tool of national power that can build trusted relationships between stakeholders, deescalate conflicts through discussions and meetings, negotiations, and facilitate expansion of political, economic, and security ties between various countries. The question is how does the bureaucracy government system pivot to support diplomacy? The U.S. State Department must be resourced adequately, it must allocate sufficient staff to countries deemed less desirable where U.S. interest are

\textsuperscript{143} Gates, “The United States Must Recover the Full Range of Its Power,” 126.
involved, and it must play a stronger role in integration, coordination, and management of nonmilitary policy across the government to address national security problems. The United States should apply economic sanctions, targeted coercion, assistance incentives, and appointing credible officials in order to mitigate conflicts. U.S. policy should encourage political reform that will enforce accountability, encourage national unity, provide for the security and basic needs of the nation's citizens. Reforms should strengthen governance and hold appointed officials accountable to local communities. Although this approach is broad and a long-term process, the United States is likely to see its own core interests served without placing its military at risk. Through well planned political means, including negotiation, many conflicts could be addressed at low cost both in treasure and in blood.

**Employ Effective Economic Initiatives**

U.S. policy should focus on partnering with the international community to create effective and sustainable economic growth programs for those states whose fragility is a threat to their region and to U.S. interests. Effective economic assistance would include access to some form of health care, facilitate the means of transportation by building roads, and enable means of communication by establishing mobile companies. U.S. policy should improve conditions for private investment and regional trade. Using diplomacy, the U.S. should outreach to neighboring states and other potential investors to persuade them to play a more proactive role in helping the fragile state increase its revenue stream and employment. Further, the U.S. should promote policies that expand the export of the host nation's natural resources where feasible, assist with contracting with foreign governments and firms, assist with allocation of revenues, suppress corruption, accelerate regional export and import, and expand business opportunities. U.S. policy should throw its weight behind initiatives that help the fragile state economically integrate into the region and incentivize regional investment.
5.4 Employ Effective Communication Plan

U.S. government should adopt a clear strategic messaging and communication strategy whenever it decides to make an important foreign policy decision. A clear communication strategy will prevent unnecessary ambiguity, provide consistent messaging to all relevant stakeholders to prevent misunderstandings, while increase trust and confidence between the American people and the U.S. government. Many opportunities to communicate with the American people and the rest of the world have been lost in the last two decades because the strategic communication of each U.S. agency and department, including the White House, was inconsistent and at times conflicting.

U.S. policymakers have not directly spoken to the American people about our national interests and why the government is pursuing certain policies, just like they have failed to communicate to the rest of the world about the scale and impact of U.S. development assistance and humanitarian assistance programs.\textsuperscript{144} Many U.S. officials believe that the U.S. did not have a consistent and transparent communication plan that kept the American people aware of the reasons for the sacrifices and investments during the many wars that the United States has engaged in.

In order to elicit domestic support from Congress and the American people for the United States’ global leadership role, U.S. policy needs a consistent strategic communications plan. This plan should articulate U.S. objectives not only to the American people, but also to U.S. allies and partners, to the country that the U.S. is involved in, and to our adversaries.

5.5 Monitor Progress of Policy and Adapt as Needed

U.S. foreign policy should put in place mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of implemented strategies in order to determine whether U.S. objectives are being achieved, and if not, then policy must be

\textsuperscript{144} Gates, 131.
adjusted to improve future program performance. Policy should include data collection, evaluation and analysis plans, and recommendations from these evaluations. These recommendations should be considered in future stabilization efforts to improve the chances for success. Evaluating the effectiveness of the employed policies will enable the U.S. to adapt its strategies against a thinking adversary and changing environments. Moreover, monitoring and evaluation plans should adequately address corruption and wastage of aid funds. Should the U.S. engage in foreign conflicts, U.S. policy must ensure that assessment and monitoring of progress is being made and communicated with U.S. Congress and the American public to the extent feasible along with supporting data.

5.6 Partner-Focused Regional Security Architecture

U.S. policy should support development of regional security architectures, potentially by combatant command, while maintaining some military presence that is ready for intervention if necessary, to protect U.S. interests. The regional security architecture should respect the multipolar balance of power, in which regional powers take responsibility and share the burden to deter aggression by rivals. Although regional states may not share the same priority of interests as the U.S., to the extent feasible each regional architecture must be predicated on promoting shared mutual interests between all stakeholders. The design, development and enforcement of the arrangement must be regionally owned, enforced, however coordinated on with the U.S. Components of such architecture would include defense, security cooperation, capacity building, arms controls, diplomacy, and possibly developing institutions to enhance regional security. The U.S. should not recreate nor reorganize partners into an American image.

In an operationalized regional security architecture, U.S. policy would strive for the following:

- Identify U.S. interests by region and continuously reassess those interests as the threat landscape evolves.

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145 Iyengar, Shapiro, and Hegarty, 32.
• Distinguish between its own interests and the objectives of the regional partners, and clearly communicate them with regional stakeholders.

• Even though the U.S. has Senate approved alliances with certain countries, while not with others, U.S. policy should actively engage all countries in each region, including those regarded as adversaries. Our national interests align with some nations while they do not with others. The U.S. should seek constructive relationship with all nations in each region while recognizing that our relationship with each country will be unique based on how well our national interests align.

• For each region, the U.S. and regional states should cooperatively adapt a diplomatic mechanism that enables members to come together in a multilateral forum to communicate and have dialogue about regional issues and interests.

• Incentivize countries that provide constructive mediation to the region while reducing assistance and political support for states that pursue aggressive and reckless actions.

• Assess its policy of arms sales across all regions and ensure that such sales do not place U.S. foreign policy objectives at risk.

• Advocate for regional agreements that put restrictions on the import and export of arms in order to prevent weapons from falling into the hands of terrorist groups.

• Advocate for multilateral agreements for intelligence collection and sharing as well as security cooperation agreements to strengthen fragile countries.

• Promote respect for human rights across all regions.

• Should the U.S. need to intervene militarily, U.S. policy must first determine whether there is a capable local partner whom the United States can support to provide security, and assess if the mission be accomplished without the U.S. military force? If U.S. military presence is absolutely required, then the right size of a sustainable force structure that would achieve U.S. objectives in each
region must be determined early on. What is the ultimate number of troops that the U.S. should put on the ground, how many bases should the troops operate from, what is the leadership and support structure to support the mission, and what are the enabling capabilities that allow them to do their jobs and also how to sustain it over a long campaign.

This proposed policy is less dependent on U.S. maintenance of balance of power by heavy military presence, military assistance, and arms sales, and more reliant on diplomacy, therefore understanding of regional politics is imperative.
Conclusion

Despite its predominantly benevolent intentions, American post-Cold War foreign policy has suffered repeated failures in achieving U.S. objectives in numerous conflicts abroad, especially in wars on terror. It is imperative to ensure that recurring mistakes in open-ended wars that are viewed as unwinnable do not become an enduring feature of the U.S. foreign policy system. Americans will be less safe if terrorist groups freely operationalize their anti-West agenda. Americans will be at risk if the war on terror further subverts regions around the world exacerbating the refugee crisis, rise totalitarian hegemons, and potentially destabilizing nuclear armed states. The United States should defend itself, but it cannot intervene in every conflict in every region to prevent terrorism.

To exercise American leadership effectively, abroad and domestically, and in a less costly way than we have seen in these failed cases, U.S. policy should be rectified from the errors of the post-Cold War conflicts. First and foremost, the United States must identify its interests, goals, and objectives as clearly and narrowly as possible. Second, U.S. policy should ensure that its plans and strategy are sufficiently resourced, coherent, and well-coordinated across the whole-of-government, and with international partners. Additionally, U.S. must revamp the culture of its military and nonmilitary institutes, ensure sufficient regional expertise, assess the risks, implications, and efficacy of its foreign policy by regional experts, and put mechanisms in place to overcome and mitigate distortive effect of preconceptions, predispositions, and assumptions. Before embarking in foreign endeavors that may not have a definite end, U.S. policy should ensure sufficient and comprehensive strategic awareness of the environments, culture and society, institutional competence, domestic constraints of the foreign land, and more importantly the limits of what the United States can achieve in such landscapes.

If the U.S. military is going to intervene in a conflict, U.S. policy must ensure that there are clearly defined objectives, that the role of the military is well-defined, and additionally that adequate resources are allocated for the mission. Moreover, if the mission changes, as it did in Somalia under
President Bill Clinton, and in Iraq under President George W. Bush, will there be proportionate change in the resources? U.S. policy must ensure that its aspirations and capabilities are aligned. The long-term instability challenge in Afghanistan required a long-term U.S strategy at an acceptable cost, however the U.S. pursued short-term policies, one-year at a time with many shifts.\textsuperscript{146}

Per the words of former Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, “U.S. leaders should recognize that it is important to use every nonmilitary instrument of power possible to encourage both friends and rivals to embrace freedom and reform. But even if U.S. officials get all the right military and non-military tools in place, it will still be up to American leaders, American legislators, and the broader American public to understand that the long-term self-interest of the United States demands that it accept the burden of global leadership.”\textsuperscript{147}

\textsuperscript{146} McMaster, \textit{Battlegrounds}, 156.

\textsuperscript{147} Gates, “The United States Must Recover the Full Range of Its Power,” 132.