

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Afghanistan: Why the West Lost

By Greg Mills

SYNOPSIS

NATO forces are set to leave Afghanistan in two months' time. What does this mean for the West and for Afghanistan itself?

COMMENTARY

As NATO troops prepare to leave Afghanistan by 11 September 2021 in the face of a Taliban surge, a question remains unanswered: Why did the international intervenors fail in their mission to bring stability to Afghanistan?

The Western withdrawal from Afghanistan has gone hand in hand with a narrative of defeat, repeated so often it's in danger of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Five reasons stand out to explain why the West has failed in its mission:

West's Best Not Good Enough

The West's best wasn't good enough: The lives of 3500 international troops plus an estimated 200,000 Afghans has not been sufficient to turn the tide against a highly motivated Taliban. This should not obscure the failure to accept from the outset that this was a strategic undertaking involving more than the toppling of the Taliban as the host of Al-Qaeda, leading to the failure to resource the mission accordingly.

The usual excuse given is that the United States got distracted by Iraq. To an extent this is true, but this does not explain why Afghanistan did not stabilise even when greater resources were available. The West's political leadership have simply lacked the strategy and patience necessary to execute a longer war.

There was no plan: The West's plan evolved by iteration, subject to changes in

personalities – of ambassadors, commanders and politicians. Strikingly strategy was eclipsed by the operational art of the military as it morphed from regime change to nation-building, constantly reverse-engineered from facts on the ground.

By doing so, the West became just another localised warlord, albeit a large and powerful – if temporary – one, to be managed, fought with, allied to, and even co-operated with, both for resources and in the realisation that it would eventually leave. Whatever the military failures, those of politicians, diplomats and aid agencies were spectacular by their relative invisibility.

The last 20 years has been about the failure of politics, internationally and regionally, and internally by the Afghans. In particular, there has been little energy put into making regional peace until very late in the day, or peace for that matter with the Taliban in Afghanistan itself.

Misguided solutions: Not only did the West overestimate the value of its agency, but the bureaucratic powerhouse of NATO exacerbated this dynamic, supercharging the detachment, jargon and militarisation in its self-interest. The chosen metrics suited the mission until that mission no longer suited the politics of NATO and of its only real enabler, the US.

Geography trumped goodwill: Not only did the Taliban prove to be a formidable and resourceful foe, but it has also received assistance from outside. Most of the neighbourhood has had reason to resent and ultimately reject the Western presence. Pakistan's perception of the West's role was, from the outset, shaped by what Islamabad saw as its betrayal after the Soviet retreat in 1989, leaving it with a civil war on its borders and more than three million Afghan refugees within them.

Thereafter the US retreated, only to return as an ally after 9/11. Afghanistan increasingly became a casualty of greater strategic interests, including the complex relationship between the West with Pakistan, complicated by the Pakistani-Indian relationship, and, overall, Islamic sentiments towards a Western presence.

Iran and the 'stans – Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan – initially wanted an end to instability and to maintain their own spheres of interest in Afghanistan; this changed as the West became mired in the struggle and the direction of US-Iran and US-Russia relations continued to sour.

The strategic sophistication of the current Taliban offensive, which appears designed to pressure Kabul by closing off access to its northern trading 'ports' into the Stans and forcing dependence on its southern routes via Pakistan, perfectly illustrates the pattern and extent of regional influences.

Failure of development assistance: With a few exceptions, the metrics of aid became about the volumes of expenditure rather than effect, fuelling vast corruption. Since the vast majority of jobs in developing countries are in the private sector, there is a need to work out exactly what this sector needs to succeed.

Between 2001 and 2019, two million men and women served from abroad in Afghanistan, and more than \$2 trillion was expended, an extraordinary, once-in-a-

generation commitment of resources to a poor country. It also represents a staggering opportunity cost.

This does not mean that all is lost. The struggle of the last 20 years has not failed. It is instead incomplete.

Rather than reverting to tired stereotypes about the war returning to an old Northern Alliance versus Taliban struggle, or the hopeful idea that the Islamists have somehow reformed in the last 20 years to a more moderate variant, this should be called for what it is: A war between a modernising republic and an obscurantist Taliban. Much has changed in the last 20 years, not least the embedding of modernity and government within communities.

The failure of this modernising project, as President Ashraf Ghani notes, “would condemn the next six generations of Afghans to their fate”.

Afghanistan Should Find Its Own Way

The West should not kid itself. If the Taliban took over, their method of governance in Afghanistan is unlikely to differ from that of 20 years ago, nor their international links more benign. It is moreover not 1996, when the Taliban was welcomed by many as a stabilising force freeing the country from the violent and costly anarchy of the feuding mujahideen warlords.

Afghanistan will now have to find its own way, some of which may be uncomfortable to Western norms and sensitivities, from arming militia to cutting deals with tribal elders. Lots of powerful people have invested a lot of money in Afghanistan.

Even if they might have externalised some, a collapse would cost them a great deal. And it will require implementing a different regional vision – more win-win than the current zero-sum – in which there are potentially rich rewards.

The Western withdrawal from Afghanistan has gone hand in hand with a narrative of defeat, one damaging to Western moral authority and the value of its alliance.

Need for New Directions

With the current insurgency, there is a need for new directions. Yet the West should back those wanting to modernise in the sober realisation that it lacked the imagination, diplomacy and staying power to do the job. Its best was simply not good enough. Instead three Western actions could stiffen an Afghan-led strategy, and achieve the things NATO was unable to get done.

First, to provide the cash to pay soldiers (and pay off others). There is other assistance, including intelligence sharing and weapons maintenance, that would also be useful. The Afghan National Army is the “backbone” of the Afghan state, as Ahmad Massoud, son of the late Northern Alliance leader, has put it, and “its biggest achievement”.

Second, to back a diplomatic solution that helps the modernisers come out on top,

including helping – and stopping to assist – regional spoilers while encouraging Afghan unity against the Taliban.

And third, while weaning Afghanistan off the aid fountain, and recognising its corrupting effect, to not cut it off completely in key areas, particularly regional infrastructure connectivity.

Before peace is possible, war is going to be necessary, since without it, the Taliban has no incentive to stop fighting. Having the West in Afghanistan did not deliver a victory. The question now is: Can its departure allow for one?

Greg Mills served as an adviser to ISAF between 2006 and 2012 and returned twice to Afghanistan to conduct research this year. He writes from Kabul and contributed this to RSIS Commentary.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg