

# Twenty Years Too Many: The Evolution in Practices and Purposes of the War in Afghanistan



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# Recent News in Afghanistan War



"The Afghan War has lacked high-level American commitment for years now. If there is any surprise, it is that for eight years of Barack Obama and four years of Donald Trump, the United States **persisted in a conflict** that most senior officials in those administrations regarded with **pessimism and distaste.**"

- Elio A. Cohen, Dean of SAIS at Johns Hopkins University

**Underlying considerations:**

**What was the war actually fought for?**

**Did the U.S. military invasion and occupation  
actually achieve its goals?**

# Three Parts

Part I: The Evolution of the War

Part II: Examining the War's Effectiveness

Part III: The Future of the U.S.'s Relationship with Afghanistan and the Taliban

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**"Our war on terror begins with Al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated."**

- Former President George W. Bush, addressing Congress and the nation on Sept. 20, 2001

# Part I: The Evolution of the War

# The Initial Invasion (2001)

- Only 1,000 U.S. forces, working alongside Afghan militias
- Using airstrikes to target terrorist groups, keep boots on the ground to a minimum
- Ends with the **removal of the Taliban** from government

# Strategic Neglect (2002-2009)

- Shift away from Afghanistan and towards Iraq
- Loose ad-hoc approach to military strategy leads to Taliban resurgence
- Forced dissolution of local militias in favor of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)
- **Security gap that further weakened the state**



# The Obama Years: Rapid Military Growth

- Goal of weakening the Taliban and strengthening the ANSF so it could replace the U.S.
- U.S. reaches peak of over **100,000 troops**
- Obama publicly put out a directive supporting counterinsurgency, but in private remained focused on getting troops out and didn't support his own strategy
- War's purpose and timeline for exit strategy remained unclear

# Part II: Examining the War's Effectiveness

**As of 2018, the Taliban was openly active across 70% of Afghanistan, almost two decades after their initial removal.**

# Why Did the U.S. Fail?

- Shift away from Afghanistan and towards Iraq after initially quelling of the Taliban's power
- Fierce Taliban resistance in Southern and Eastern Afghanistan
- Dissolution of local militias
- Pakistan's support of the Taliban along the border

**Lack of political clarity of long-term goals in Afghanistan**



# Measuring Ineffectiveness

**\$778 Billion**

U.S. cost of the war from 2001-2019

**45,000**

Number of Afghan Security Forces  
members who have been killed  
since 2014

**32,000**

Estimated number of civilians killed

- Resurgence of the Opium Industry
- Afghan government dependence on the U.S.
- Casualties
- Psychological damage to Afghan people

# Part III: The Future of the U.S.'s Relationship with Afghanistan and the Taliban

# Trump Administration

- Negotiations first began in 2012, but stalled over the years between the U.S. and Taliban
- December 2020: Taliban and Afghan government agree to procedures and rules for future peace talks
- Announced May 1, 2021 deadline to get all troops out

# Biden Administration

- Announced full withdrawal of troops in Afghanistan by September 11, 2021
- 3,000 troops will remain in Afghanistan beyond Trump's deadline
- Taliban's demand: That the government release 7,000 Taliban prisoners

## Conclusion:

# Will There Ever Be a Way Out of Afghanistan?

- Terrorist organizations in the region more dispersed now than when the war began
- **Unclear who the U.S. is fighting and why**
- Fear from U.S. political left and right about what a withdrawal could mean for Afghanistan
- Concern from Afghans, particularly women, about future without the U.S.



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