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## **Why did the Taliban win?**

**Anthony King**

### **Introduction**

On 7 October 2001, three weeks after 9/11, US forces attacked Afghanistan; bombers struck Taliban headquarters and Al Qaeda training sites, including Osama Bin Laden's favourite Afghan residence, Tarnak Farms, just south of Kandahar airfield. US Special Operations Force arrived in the north soon after, sweeping the Taliban regime away with the Northern Alliance. By 23 November 2001, they had reached Kabul; the Taliban fled. In the south, US Special Forces finally defeated the Taliban in the terminal building of Kandahar Airfield, the 'Last Stand', on 7 December. The initial US intervention was a startling success; 110 CIA agents, 350 Special Operations Forces personnel and 5000 soldiers and marines had destroyed a regime and defeated Al Qaeda in a few weeks. Only 12 US service personnel died in the operation; by contrast, 15,000 Taliban had been killed or captured (Malkasian 2021: 66).

The US intervention was understandable and, indeed, inevitable. Having suffered mass civilian casualties in an unprovoked terrorist outrage, no state, still less the world's only superpower, would have abjured retaliation. Yet, from a beguiling beginning, the US were unwittingly following an established historical pattern in Afghanistan. They were compelled to intervene ever deeper into a theatre which had always proved very difficult for foreign powers to stabilise. A war which began so successfully in 2001, eventually ended ignominiously on 30 August 2021, almost exactly twenty years later, with a US withdrawal and a total Taliban victory. The speed of the Taliban's triumph shocked everyone. The entire campaign, costing \$2.3 trillion and 2488 US lives, had failed - utterly. The United States had lost its longest ever war. How is it possible to explain a defeat of that magnitude?

The Afghan campaign was complicated. Eventually, over forty nations contributed to the security effort alone. In addition, many more contributed to development effort, while a panoply of international organisations, like the UN, and non-governmental aid organisations also became involved. Each influenced the campaign and, therefore, ultimately contributed to the defeat of 2021. Many other factors were also at play. The cost of the campaign especially after the Crash of 2008, the distraction of Iraq, the excessive use of Special Operations Forces raids, air-strikes, corruption, the destruction of poppy harvests, the interference of Pakistan, the inability to build Afghan security forces, dwindling public support all played their part. While campaigning for the Presidency, Trump declared his opposition to the Afghanistan campaign in some notorious tweets: ‘Afghanistan is a complete waste. Time to come home’) In office, he decided to pull out unilaterally with few conditions imposed upon the Taliban. This decision was manifestly also critical to the outcome. President Biden only compounded that decision. The causes of the failure in Afghanistan were plainly complex and multiple; political, strategic, operational and tactical mistakes all played a role (Greentree 2021).

Scholars will be debating the defeat for decades, as they have Vietnam. It is impossible to capture the interplay of all these factors comprehensively in a short article. However, a few months after the humiliation in Kabul, it might be worth recording some obvious elements which seem to have been central to the defeat and which are likely to be the focus of future analysis. I do not propose a refined assessment of specific policies or western strategy in general; on the contrary, I bluntly identify three major obstructions to western success in the theatre. The article explores three decisive conditions of the US defeat: the environment, Afghan politics and the Taliban. Firstly, Afghanistan is a very difficult place in which to conduct a major military campaign. Secondly, the west never understood the politics of Afghanistan. Thirdly, the Taliban were a resilient opponent. These factors may not be definitive but they are recognised by everyone remotely familiar with Afghanistan as

minimally important. They might usefully be the starting place of a preliminary dissection of the defeat, therefore. This article examines each of these three factors in turn to explain why the western efforts between 2001 and 2021 ultimately failed.

## **The Environment**

Campaigning in Afghanistan has always been very difficult; ‘Afghanistan is a hard country’ (Malkasian 2021: 2). It is an intensely demanding theatre. The briefest examination of its geography reveals the problem. The country is a land-locked high altitude, mountainous desert. It has no ports, nor any navigable rivers. For nearly six months of the year, its high passes are blocked with snow, or obstructed by rain and poor weather. In the summer, temperatures especially in the south are ferocious; 40 degrees is the norm, 50 degrees is common. Travel in Afghanistan is arduous, major military operations border on the impractical. So far from ports or rivers, logistical problems become intractable.

Partly as a result of its topography, Afghanistan’s human geography compound the problems for any external force, hoping to exert itself. Although Afghanistan has historically been dominated by Pashtuns, the country consists of three other major ethnic groups; the Hazaras in the west, the Uzbeks in the north-east and the Tajiks in the north and north-west. In the deserts of the south, Kuchi pastoralists also play a periodically significant role. In addition to its ethnic divisions, communities are themselves organised on fissiparous tribal lines especially in the Pashtun south. Tribes fight against each other as bitterly as against other ethnic groupings. Internecine local rivalries are the norm; hostility to outsiders ubiquitous. Most males are armed. The Afghan polity is therefore always fragile; periods of stability have occurred but they depend on delicate balances of power at local, regional and national level rather than an enduring central authority based on one ethnic group and one lineage. Centripetal forces are always in danger of asserting themselves, as tribal leaders form

alliances of convenience (Barfield 2012; Goodson 2001; Rashid 2009). Foreign troops have rarely been welcome.

It is therefore unsurprising that Afghanistan has been called the ‘graveyard of empires’ (Jones 2009). Even the most powerful polities have struggled to exert control over the region. However, while it is very difficult to operate in Afghanistan it has recurrently demanded the attention of the Great Powers. This is perhaps surprising as there has often been little intrinsic value in engaging in Afghanistan; it is poor, remote country. However, in order to secure their borders, states have recurrently found that an amenable regime in Kabul, protected against hostile foreign influence, is necessary. The geostrategic importance of Afghanistan has often belied its intrinsic political and economic worth.

The history of foreign intervention into Afghanistan in the nineteenth century – the so-called Great Game - demonstrates the strategic imperative which Afghanistan has recurrently exerted on the Great Powers, as well as the challenges of campaigning in this country (Hopkirk 2006). Afghanistan was peripheral to the imperial interests of either the Russian or British Empires. Yet, mutually fearing that Afghanistan might be employed as a means of destabilising their imperial heartlands, Russia and Britain struggled for influence over the region. The British implausibly believed that the North-West Frontier of India was vulnerable to a Russian military attack across Afghanistan; the Russians feared any expansion of the British sphere of influence into their southern flank. As a result, the British fought two major wars in 1839-42 and then 1878-80. Both involved terrible defeats and unsatisfactory treaties. Russia made a series of contemporaneous interventions into the east.

In the twentieth century, the pattern continued. The British Empire reasserted some control over Afghanistan in the Third Afghan War of 1919-20 with the affirmation of the Durand line. This campaign notably involved an early use of aerial policing: bombing villages in order to compel civilian compliance. It was the last intervention of the British

Empire. Soon after, the newly formed Soviet Union brought Afghanistan under its sphere of influence and oversaw a period of stability which lasted for the fifty years. It only finally unravelled in the 1970s in the face famine, economic collapse and political turbulence. As a new communist regime in Kabul collapsed into in-fighting, the Soviet Union was soon dragged into Afghanistan just like the British Empire before it. On Christmas Day in 1979, the Soviet Union was infamously drawn into its final and disastrous neo-imperial adventure in the Hindu Kush; Spetsnaz forces landed at Kabul Airport and assassinated the rogue communist President Amin. It was the start of forty years of continuous war. Soviet military operations failed, at great human and material cost, contributing to the collapse of the Soviet Union (Grau 2014; Braithwaite 2012). History proves the point; Afghanistan is a very difficult place to campaign. Military interventions have rarely succeeded in this inaccessible and arduous theatre.

Like many previous interventions, especially the Soviet one of 1979, the US were drawn into Afghanistan by accident. Operation Enduring Freedom began as a punitive mission against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in October 2001. It was overwhelmingly successful. The Taliban were deposed; Al Qaeda defeated and dispersed. Yet, it quickly expanded into a complex, often inchoate, international exercise in state building, development and capacity building. The US lost just as previous empires had failed to prevail in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is simply a theatre in which it is ultimately impossible to sustain military interventions at any scale. The costs imposed by Afghanistan's strategic position, the terrain and an often hostile people finally became prohibitive even for the US. In the end, in this theatre, that was militarily unsustainable.

Political and military leaders fully recognised that an interminable, large-scale military campaign was not viable. For instance, it was quite obvious that Barack Obama's surge had to be short. He, therefore, limited his surge to twelve months, principally for

political reasons but also because an endless operation was not logistical supportable.

Consequently, while the surge squeezed the Taliban out of many areas, it also could never provide a permanent political solution. The gains were temporary. In Afghanistan, long-term, large-scale military occupation is simply not an option for a foreign power. In August 2021, the US repeated the mistakes which the Russian, British, and Soviet empires had recurrently made in the last two hundred years. It sought a military solution. That was never going to work.

Indeed, the problem of sustaining of the US and ISAF military effort generated some rather striking ironies in the course of the campaign. Most western logistic supplies came through the port of Karachi. They were then transported on ‘jingly’ lorries driven by locals up through Pakistan, through the Khyber Pass and into Afghanistan. These lorries were subject to extortion by local militias on their journey. Significantly, the Taliban themselves taxed ISAF’s supplies; the Taliban in Sayed Abad district in Wardak province was particularly active (Giustozzi 2019: 74). In order to get their supplies into the country to prosecute a military campaign against the Taliban, the west was in fact funding their enemies. Because of Afghanistan’s geographic location, the campaign had become self-perpetuating and self-defeating.

## **The Politics**

Why did the US and the west ever attempt a major military enterprise in Afghanistan, given the challenges of geography and climate? There are many answers to this but the most plausible is that they utterly misunderstood the theatre. As a senior US Army officer, Lieutenant General David Lute, declaimed in a Lesson Learned report: ‘We were devoid of a

fundamental understanding of Afghanistan – we didn't know what we were doing' (Whitelock 2021: 110). The problem was the politics. In his famous work on Communist insurgency, Robert Thompson argued that the second principle of counter-insurgency was to have a clear political goal (Thompson 1974). By this, he also meant an achievable one. The western intervention into Afghanistan never remotely applied Thompson's principle.

The politics of Afghanistan have always been complex. It has never been a centralised state with a homogeneous demos. The country has always been de-centralised, fragmented and federated from Kabul down to the Provinces and even to village level. The US – and its allies – never appreciated fully appreciated the politics of Afghanistan. They built a militarised campaign which contradicted political realities, rather than adapting to them.

**The political contradictions at the heart of the western campaign pervaded the entire enterprise but they were most clearly evident at the high point of the campaign in 2009-2010; the Barak Obama surge. In June 2009, General Stanley McChrystal was appointed the Commander of ISAF specifically to direct the surge of an additional 30,000 US troops. McChrystal's new strategy was to apply the counter-insurgency principles which had been rediscovered and re-applied so successfully to Iraq. He articulated these principles in his plan for the surge, Operation OMID (Hope, in Dari), issued on 1 November 2009. The aim of Operation Omid was to focus troops on 80 key terrain districts and to secure the populations there in an attempt to defeat the Taliban.**

After almost a decade of incoherent campaigning, there was much to praise about Operation OMID. It was coherent and comprehensive. However, the plan was informed by a distinctive political concept which McChrystal made very clear in his Commander's Initial Assessment of Afghanistan which was leaked to the press in August 2009:

Our strategy cannot be focused on seizing terrain or destroying insurgents; our objective must be the people. ... Success will be achieved when [the



government] has earned the support of the powerful Afghan people and effectively controls its own territory (General McChrystal, 2009: 1-1, 2-15).

Operation Omid advocated a population-centric approach, of the type which had worked in Iraq. Therefore, Op OMID defined the ‘people of Afghanistan’ as the centre of gravity. At the same time, as McChrystal’s statement reveals, the people represented only one pole of the campaign. The other pole was, of course, the Afghan state. The central idea animating McChrystal’s plan was that the campaign should seek to extend the power of Afghan state by linking it to the people—especially the village elders—and generating consent among the people for this state. By empowering the Afghan state and connecting with it to its people, Operational Omid would suppress the Taliban. At the time, Operation OMID also identified Afghan warlords, tribal leaders and ‘powerbrokers’ as malign actors, whose negative influence had to be neutralized. These leaders were explicitly identified as a central target of the operation. The aim was to marginalize these leaders and exclude them from the political process. This would be achieved by linking central government with acceptable sub-national actors. Linking Afghan government representatives with traditional leaders at district and sub-district level were seen to be closest to the people and, therefore, decisive in defeating the insurgency. Operation Omid was a state-centric plan.

Of course, McChrystal’s plan reflected an understanding of Afghanistan which had been dominant in the international community and ISAF since the initial decision to intervene in 2001 and 2002. At the Bonn conference, for instance, the international community began to commit itself to the development of a centralized, democratic Afghan state as an ideal. ‘The re-establishment of permanent governmental institutions’ was envisaged as a way of creating this new Afghan state around Karzai as the elected president the structures of which were ratified by the new Afghan Constitution. The Afghan Compact agreed after the London Conference in 2006 confirmed the state-centric orientation:

Democratic governance and the protection of human rights constitute the cornerstone of sustainable political progress in Afghanistan. The Afghan Government will rapidly expand its ability to provide basic services to the population throughout the country. It will recruit competent and credible professionals to public service on the basis of merit; establish a more effective, accountable and transparent administration at all levels of Government.

(NATO 2013: 3)

Political leaders were explicit about their vision of the new Afghan polity which they wanted to create. Gordon Brown, the British Prime Minister, claimed that ‘there could only be one winner [in Afghanistan]: democracy and a strong Afghan state’ (Stewart 2009:3). Even though the Bush administration initially eschewed state-building, they too recognized the need for a strong state because of their belief that ‘the manner in which a state orders its internal social, political and economic relations is inextricably linked to the degree of threat’ it is likely to pose internationally (Bird and Marshall 2011: 160). Ronald Neumann, US ambassador to Afghanistan between 2005 and 2007, affirmed the state-centric project. Western leaders unanimously rejected such an approach because ‘even if militia forces backed-up by coalition troops and air strikes could win local victories, we would only be strengthening forces inimical to central government’ (Bird and Marshall 2011: 162).

The Afghan intervention was predicated on a belief that stability could be best achieved through a centralized, democratically accountable state. By providing universal services to the population and providing for their security, this state would earn the consent of the people as a whole, which (notwithstanding ethnic and tribal differences) would at least be united as a demos. Through the building of state-owned Afghan Security Forces and the empowerment of official Afghan structures, Operation OMID aimed to create stability by eliminating the insurgency and ultimately displacing the warlords and strongmen.

McChrystal's Operation OMID was a reflection of deeply held views in the West about the nature of the enterprise in Afghanistan; state-building was central. Yet, while McChrystal formally committed himself to this state-centric project from 2009, the actual political realities in Afghanistan were quite other. In Afghanistan, the West was not dealing with a centralized or centralizing state, even of a nascent kind. On the contrary, it was engaging with a federated patrimonial regime dominated by warlords, strongmen and tribal leaders. As a patrimonial regime, Afghanistan consisted of patron-client hierarchies, based on personal relations and obligations between leaders, warlords, and followers. These warlords 'thrive when the state no longer holds a monopoly on legitimate violence and is not able to provide crucial services' (Malejacq 2020: 53) or 'where central authority has either collapsed or weakened or was never there in the first place' (Giustozzi 2010: 5).

Afghanistan's patrimonial regime was evidenced most clearly in the critical southern area in the period 2006-2011, at the height of the western intervention: the provinces of Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan. Operation Omid identified Governors Tooraylai Wesa in Kandahar and Gulab Mangal in Helmand were identified as the political spine around which the operation was built. Governance, development and security lines of operation were nominally built around them. After all, they were the official Afghan governors; they were legitimate state actors. In Helmand in the period 2010 to 2012, ISAF was temporarily successfully in empowering Gulab Mangal and reducing the power of the strongmen but at an insupportable cost which could not be remotely matched elsewhere. It was an illusory strategy.

The reality was that from 2001, politics in and around Kandahar was dominated by a small oligarchy of warlords and tribal leaders. This group included Ahmed Wali Karzai, Gul Agha Sherzai, Jan Mohammed Khan, Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, Arif Noorzai, and Colonel Razziq. Most of these figures were established tribal leaders who had fought against

or at least opposed the Taliban. Between 2003 to his death in 2011, Ahmed Wali Karzai was the dominating influence in the south. Drawing on his tribal power bases and commercial and political allies, Ahmed Wali Karzai monopolized political and economic opportunities in and around Kandahar for his own benefit, sometimes corrupting government, the judiciary and commerce. He disadvantaged and marginalized rival tribal groups.

Yet, Ahmed Wali Karzai not outside the Afghan state. On the contrary, he and his peers also occupied positions in the official Afghan state. These positions were important to them since they furnished them with power and authority and crucially linked them to the West. However, his networks extended well beyond the fragile and thin entity of the Afghan state. As Roman Malejacq has noted: ‘Warlords undertake a *fonction totale*, exerting a monopoly over all sources of power on their territory simultaneously, in states that are “incapable of projecting power and asserting authority within their own borders, leaving their territories governmentally empty” (failed states) or at least in areas where state power is completely absent (areas of failed statehood) (Malejacq 2020: 5). The powerbrokers in the south had dense political associations which extended horizontally across the patron class to produce a patrimonial network secured together through personal ties of kinship, tribal, and business ties. Ahmed Wali Karzai, the half-brother of Hamid Kharzai, was married to Arif Noorzai’s sister. These networks extended downwards through cascading client relations downwards into the villages themselves. The point is that they were the state, not enemies of it.

There is little doubt that Afghanistan’s warlords and leaders were problematic; indeed, they were widely reviled by Western actors since the intervention. They were all intimately associated with the narcotics trade and, therefore, ipso facto corrupt. As one commentator observed wilyly: ‘I do not exclude the possibility that the regime in Kabul and its affiliates around the country amounted to a clique of criminal predators collecting what they

could before making their retreat' (Mukhopadyay 2014: 45). Sarah Chayes identified their corruption as one of the central reasons for western failure (Chayes 2006). In many cases, the activities of these powerbrokers were a major cause of the insurgency because exploited and marginalised tribes allied with the Taliban. In other cases, they allied personally with Taliban against ISAF.

However, the warlords and strongmen were re-empowered by Western intervention; the US re-installed and, then, funded the Karzai patrimony after 2001, crystallizing the networks which dominated Afghanistan. For instance, in Kandahar, Gul Afghan Sherzai's re-appropriation of power (he had been Governor from 1992 to 1994 until he was forced out by the Taliban) was facilitated by the CIA who found him a useful partner in prosecuting Operation Enduring Freedom against Al Qaeda and the remnants of the Taliban. He was underwritten financially by the CIA, paid \$1.5 million a year by the US for the rent for Kandahar Airfield, which he putatively owned. The intervention ultimately relied on these partners.

Moreover, despite the great difficulties which the patrons posed, they represented the only plausible bases of power. Thus, western partners complained bitterly about Ahmed Wali Karzai. Yet, they also admitted that he got things done. Until his death, Ahmed Wali Karzai was one of the main facilitators for the West in Kandahar city. For instance although operation Omid might have identified Governor Wesa as the reference point, ISAF and the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team (KPRT) relied on him for development projects in relation to the Dand Dam and indeed for most works within the Province. These leaders were also the only independent actors who exert effective political power against the Taliban. Colonel Razziq—known as 'the general' or 'the godfather'—was a colourful and instructive example here. The subject of a critical article in the US media, he controlled the border crossing at Spin Boldak with his Afghan Border Police (which were part of his larger

personal militia) from 2001 to 2009 when he was promoted to Kandahar Chief of Police (Benoit 2013). Since his brother and uncle were killed by the Taliban, he was their implacable opponent until his own assassination by the Taliban in 2014. He was sometime brutal. Yet, he was also extremely effective if brutal in interdicting the Taliban until his assassination by them. As Kandahar Chief of Police, he played a crucial role in holding the Taliban back after the western withdrawal. It was precisely because of his effectiveness that the Taliban tried twice to assassinate him, the second time, in April 2017, successfully. While the west constantly moralized about Razziq, Taliban leaders who behaved in the same way were often seen by the west as simply ruthless or determined opponents.

A central mistake throughout the western intervention was that ISAF failed to develop a pragmatic political strategy. It failed to engage with the patrimonial regime which it had installed. It made little systematic attempt to reform or moderate their actions. It deplored the corruption of individuals like Ahmed Wali Karzai, Sher Mohammed Akhunzada, Gul Agha Sherzai or Colonel Razziq but was ultimately dependent upon them. The result was that rather than cultivating a robust, coherent patrimonial regime, the west often worked against it. It failed to generate any unity among the patrimonial elites or to reform any of their corrupt practices. Instead, the west constantly undermined key leaders in its pursuit of an illusory centralized state.

This failure to understand Afghan's patrimonial regime was an underlying flaw during the military campaign of 2001-2013. It also seems to have played immediately into the catastrophe of 2021. Everyone was shocked by the rapidity of the government's collapse in 2021. The Taliban were not militarily powerful enough to defeat the ANA so quickly. So how could it have happened? The politics of Afghanistan might provide an answer. The Taliban takeover was not a military victory but a political one which is best explained by reference to the patrimonial regime which the west had constructed.

Between 2013 and 2021, the western strategy relied on building a robust security force, which it was presumed would be loyal to the regime, simply because the centre had funded its training. In fact, the west had been successful training Afghan troops to deploy into the provinces. The presumption was that once these troops were professionally trained, they would automatically behave like western professional troops. They were part of the Afghan state and would fight for that state and its President. In reality, although Afghan troops might have been trained centrally, once they deployed into the field, they were not longer truly state forces. Rather, they came under the influence and sometimes direct command of local warlords and patrons. In Kandahar, the commander of the Afghan Army 205 Corps deferred to Ahmed Wali Karzai on many occasions. This arrangement had worked during the western intervention. It had been broadly sustainable during while the US were still committed to Afghanistan because those warlords interests were partly served by a shallow allegiance to Kabul.

However, once President Trump ordered a total withdrawal in 2020 and President Biden confirmed it in 2021, the situation had changed radically. The US commitment to Afghanistan seemed small but it exerted a light but decisive centrifugal force on the fractitious Afghan polity. Even though many warlords and tribal leaders did not like President Ashraf Ghani, they were willing to support his regime, as long as the Americans were behind it; even Abdullah Abdullah consented. Once they were gone, centripetal tendencies took over. There was no reason why warlords and magnates would subordinate themselves to a central regime they did not like. Consequently, from May 2021 as the US finally withdraw, warlords and local patrons re-aligned themselves with the Taliban. They defected instantly.

Why did the ANA not fight for the government as this re-alignment took place and as the Taliban took over? Corruption in the ANA always meant that Afghan battalions were

always much weaker than they appeared as generals claimed wages for troops they did not have. The morale of the ANA had been severely damaged by heavy casualties in the preceding year. However, there was little fighting in the provinces because these same warlords and patrons who now sided with the Taliban also controlled the ANA forces in their provinces. The security collapse was also catastrophic because as local leaders re-aligned to the Taliban, they instructed client Afghan Army units in their provinces to surrender, disarm or simply to go home. Soldiers deserted in droves. Only well-paid, highly trained Special Operations Forces, who have always been independent of local patronage, remained committed to the fight against the Taliban. The Ghani regime collapsed from within; the political elite defected taking the security forces with them. It imploded so easily because the west had always failed to understand or to acknowledge its true character. Even to the end, the west was trying to build a centralized state rather than work with the actual centres of power.

## **The Taliban**

The military and political mistakes which the west made were serious. Many critics rightly focus on them. Yet, the defeat of the west cannot only be explained by western mistakes. The Taliban have to be recognized as a formidable opponent, who prevailed despite numerous disastrous setbacks. The Taliban emerged among the students of the madrassas of western Pakistan in the early 1990s. Young Pashtuns, refugees from the Soviet invasion and subsequent civil wars, were radicalized in Islamic scholars. Under the influence of Pakistan's ISI, they formed a new Islamicist political party, the Taliban; Talib means student in Pashtu (Rashid 2010). The Taliban was always a Pashtun movement. Its heartland was Kandahar Province and especially the districts of Zhari and Panjwai where Mullah Omar was born – and died. However, unlike the fractious patrimonial regime constructed after the western



intervention, it was not compromised by tribal affiliations. Because it was consciously Islamicist, it was able to unite as a political movement. It was a party, not a tribe or a clan. In this way, it was far superior to its political opponents who were always riven with rivalry and in-fighting.

It would be wrong of course to claim that the Taliban were ever completely unified. The Taliban may have avoided the entrenched rivalries of the Karzai regime but it was organized around personal, charismatic leaders such as Dadullah Lang, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Mullah Manzoor and Abdul Qayum Zakir. Consequently, it was always a profound ‘polycentric movement’, despite the Quetta Shura. Power was never centralized but the Taliban also ‘failed to establish a genuinely collegial leadership’ (Giustozzi 2019: 247). The result was constant division and rivalry between leaders even within the Quetta Shura. It was widely believed that when Dadullah was killed in 2007 in Helmand, Baradar was implicated (Giustozzi 2019: 71). The creation of the autonomous Miran Shah Shura and Peshawar Shuras in 2010 (Giustozzi 2019: 77-107). The Taliban was a federated front rather a truly single party. Yet, although more divided than other insurgent movements, it was still comparatively advantaged over its opponents. The Taliban were unified enough to win: ‘Compared to the tribes and the government, the Taliban were cohesive’ (Malkasian 2021: 454).

The Taliban leadership consisted of committed and charismatic leaders. However, capable though many were, they could have done little without external support. Karzai’s patrimonial regime relied on the western intervention. Similarly, the Taliban depended upon the financial, political and military support of Pakistan and Iran. Pakistan and its intelligence service, ISI, in particular, had always supported the Taliban. ISI and perhaps even the Pakistani army had facilitated the Taliban’s coup in 1996. After their defeat in 2001, Pakistani support faded; they believed the movement was finished. It provided \$20 million

dollars to establish the Quetta Shura in 2003 but little more. However, in 2005, Pakistan's attitude changed. Pakistan was threatened by a western-backed regime in Kabul which, they recognized, was increasingly unpopular with many Afghan people. Consequently, Pakistan saw an opportunity and began to sponsor the Taliban systematically (Giustozzi 2019: 53). The ISI provided intelligence, financial and military support; it pressured the Quetta Shura to use its resources more effectively. At the same time, Iran and the Iranian Guard Revolutionary Corps began to engage with the Taliban providing increasing support. In 2006, they donated \$30 million; in 2013, \$190 million. In addition to financial support, the Taliban's military innovations were dependent upon Pakistani and Iranian advisers (Giustozzi 2019: 141).

As the collapse of the Karzai regime showed, none of this generous external support would have mattered had the Taliban not been able to mobilise support in Afghanistan itself. They were very adept at this. Since the Soviet invasion, there had been major land reforms especially in southern Afghanistan. These reforms and the Mujaheddin war had disturbed established patterns of ownership, advantaging new lineages. In the south, the Karzai regime mainly consisted of warlords and tribal leaders who had emerged as major land-owners in this era. The Noorzais and Alizais became dominant in Helmand, for instance, the 1980s and 1990s; the Akhundzadas, Mohammed Nazir and Yahya Khan all emerged then. Although they were always fatally divided, these groups represented the richest and most powerful clans in the Province. By contrast, the poor, immigrant, often landless farmers of Helmand were marginalized. Consequently, in Helmand, the Taliban affiliated with these poorer groups; they were their power base. They formed alliances with the local mullahs in poor villages to cement their power in the 1990s. On their return after 2003, they began to ally with these poor marginalized farmers again and to recruit them as political supporters and fighters again (Malkasian 2013: 63-70). The western restoration of the old land-owning elites

helped them in this process: ‘The tribal leaders and the government turned a deaf ear to the grievances of the landless immigrants. Where they deemed fit, the tribal leaders took land back for themselves’ (Malkasian 2013: 81). The Taliban allied with expropriated peasant farmers.

In addition to this expropriation, the Karzai government became increasingly unpopular among poor Afghan peasants because of the depredations of its security forces. The abuses of the Afghan National Police were a major grievance; the destruction of poppy was another issue (Giustozzi 2019: 53). In stark contrast to the corruption of the Karzai regime, the Taliban delivered immediate and transparent local justice (through empowered mullahs and village elders) and security against the police to its supporters; they also protected their opium crops. They gave land to the poor tribes (Malkasian 2013: 112-115). The result was that at the village level, the Taliban tended to out-govern the Karzai regime. The Taliban’s rule should not be sanitized. Although they were seen as fairer than the warlords by some, they were brutal. Opponents were intimidated and killed. Indeed, at the height of the conflict in 2008-2011, the Taliban became especially violent as they struggled to maintain control of their areas in the face of ISAF pressure. Some left the movement because of their atrocities; they lost much popular support. Nevertheless, the Taliban, like the Vietcong, were better able to build up and sustain support at the local level. That popular support eventually prevailed over a venal and divided patrimonial regime (Farrell 2018).

The Taliban finally won because it was a strong guerrilla force but its operational performance was patchy and even its best leaders were not tactically brilliant. Its great strength was its extraordinary resilience. Between 2002 and 2014, the Taliban lost between 10 and 20 per cent of its fighters every year. In the course of the whole campaign, it lost an estimated 100,000 fighters (Giustozzi 2019: 2, 63). In some groups, the casualties were crippling: ‘Of ten men in this group I joined in 2009, only I remain alive’. Other Taliban

fighters stated that 83 of their comrades had been killed (Giustozzi 2019: 118). In the face of these losses, morale collapsed in some groups and defection increased; atrocities became more common. Yet, the Taliban continued to fight. Like the Vietcong, the Taliban prevailed simply because they were willing to take massive casualties until they achieved their goals. The contrast with ISAF and some elements of the Afghan National Security Forces was stark.

The Taliban may not have been great tacticians but they did develop some highly effective combat techniques (Farrell and Giustozzi 2018). Manifestly, the Improvised Explosive Device was the most important tactical innovation here; it was the weapon which inflicted the most casualties on their opponents. The Taliban did not develop the IED on their own. On the contrary, its development seems to have been dependent upon Pakistan and Iranian advisers who trained the bomb-makers and sourced the specialist material. Under this patronage, Taliban IED production exploded. In Helmand, workshops which originally produced IEDs in batches of ten were replaced by large factories production an IED every fifteen minutes; IED production became industrial (Giustozzi 2019: 139). From 2008, the Taliban mass produced IEDs. In 2014, the Taliban emplaced 20,000 IEDs in Kandahar alone (Giustozzi 2019: 140).

The method of production was distinctive. Materiel, especially the detonators, for the IEDs was sourced globally with the help of Pakistan and Iran; some detonators were even traced back to the middle east from decades earlier. These parts were then brought to workshops where specialist bomb-makers constructed the explosive device. The devices were then transported to other outlets which connected the detonator to the explosives themselves, normally fertilizer, and dug them into the ground. The Taliban had created a sophisticated decentralised hub-and-spoke system of IED production. The manufacturing process might even be called post-Fordist; a dispersed production system was organized into a specialist core and unskilled periphery. It unwittingly imitated the method of flexible specialization evident in

industry since the 1980s. The result was that the Taliban were difficult to beat. They were ultimately good enough to win.

## **Conclusion**

The Taliban won the Afghan war for three central reasons. Firstly, Afghanistan is a theatre in which it is almost impossible for a foreign power to sustain major military operations.

Secondly, the west never understood local politics. The regime which the west built after the deposition of the Taliban was fractured and corrupt; the west pursued the mirage of a centralised Afghan state, rather than reforming the patrimonial regime which existed. Finally, the Taliban was a very resilient opponent.

The Afghan Campaign was always going to be difficult, therefore. Might the west have won it if they had implemented a different strategy? Many commentators now believe that the eventual catastrophe in August 2021 demonstrated the inevitable failure of the Afghan intervention. For them, the debacle in Kabul proved it was a doomed project from the outset. It was always going to end in a total Taliban takeover. Although the eventual outcome is undeniable, it seems very uncertain that it had to end the way it did. Before 2005, even Pakistan thought the Taliban a spent force and it is doubtful whether many Taliban leaders believed in 2009-10 whether they could ever triumph so completely. It is possible that the west might have avoided a catastrophe had they adopted a different approach. While the heavily militarised campaign which the west eventually fought was unlikely to succeed, it seems possible that a smaller, low intensity, politically astute, pragmatic campaign might have worked. Both Kael West and Rory Stewart for instance had recommended a 'go low to stay long approach' (Malkasian 2021: 235). Instead of rejecting the likes of Ahmed Wali Karzai or Colonel Razziq, this strategy might have sought to ally with capable anti-Taliban local allies, whatever their proclivities and backgrounds. Majority military forces would

never had deployed. A campaign of this design would have been conducted by intelligence operators and political agents to encourage and even compel leaders to govern better at the village level. A few special operations forces would have trained local militia. Such a configuration might have allowed for some eventual accommodation with the Taliban. It is, of course, impossible to know whether this low level, pragmatic approach would have worked. Yet, it is now certain that this approach could not have been worse than the one which was taken which we now know failed totally. Certainly, it would have incurred anything like the financial, physical and political costs of the actual campaign.

It is also very noticeable that this alternative, pragmatic approach was closer to the one which the US adopted successfully in Iraq in 2006-07. In the face of a strategic defeat, the US took the radical decision to form an alliance with local Sunni Sheikhs in Anbar Province, whom they had up to that point been fighting, against Al Qaeda. The surge of US troops and the change of tactics were certainly important. However, this political re-alignment allowed the surge to be successful (Biddle et al. 2012). The problem in Afghanistan was that there was no Awakening. Ignoring political realities, the west never accepted their local partners. They sleep-walked to disaster. As always, it is the Afghan people who suffered the consequences.

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