

Lessons Learned from Afghanistan: The Heavy Price of Treating Long-Term Strategic Issues with Short-Term Tactical Approaches

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Abstract How did the U.S. “war on terror” start with the swift defeat of the Taliban post-9/11, only to end with the very same Taliban recapturing Afghanistan, as if twenty years of global efforts, sacrifices, achievements, and countless lives lost had never happened? *Lessons from Afghanistan: America's Longest War* gathers prominent scholars, experts, leaders, and decision-makers from around the globe to answer this and other vital questions. The authors in this volume argue that lessons learned in Afghanistan reveal why U.S.-led global efforts yielded unwanted outcomes, despite all the precious lives lost and nearly two trillion spent to ensure victory. Based on decades of academic research and practitioner experience, the authors in this collection of essays assert that we can and must utilize these lessons to inform future U.S. foreign policy to effectively compete in the modern Great Power Competition. This chapter opens the discussion by suggesting that a lack of U.S. strategic patience, alongside missed opportunities to develop a sustainable economy based on natural resources in Afghanistan, ultimately undermined two decades of heartfelt U.S. military assistance and resulted in the failure to “win the hearts and minds” of ordinary Afghan people. This critical misstep effected the final blow to top-down “western-style” nation-building efforts—levying a heavy cost to the U.S. by weakening national security and influence in the region and positioning in the broader Great Power Competition. Further, the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from the Kabul airport and subsequent Afghan humanitarian crisis resurrected memories of similar failed “western-style” nation-building efforts in Iraq and Vietnam. Global perceptions of these unfortunate failures indicate a lack of strategic patience that perpetuates claims of declining U.S. influence. This not only impacts U.S. national security but its allies and all those around the world who still hold true to the values of “liberty” and “freedom.” In an era of shifting geopolitics, in which China and Russia vie for global hegemony, the U.S. must swiftly re-assess the effectiveness of its foreign policy and operational strategies in the region. Such an honest examination offers realistic hope for the U.S. to strengthen its credibility and influence in the region through reinvigorated resource-based economic facilitation in Afghanistan.

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Keywords Great power competition · Afghanistan · Taliban · Doha Agreement · War on terror · Central Asia · Insurgency · National security · Nation-building · United States

1 Introduction

The swift collapse of the U.S.-backed Afghan Government on August 15, 2021, stunned the international community as “Taliban” fighters ripped through the country with an unprecedented lightning offensive. Afghan troops crumbled with little resistance, and the capital city of Kabul fell within hours. The striking Taliban coup unfolded with an eerie efficiency, mirroring the U.S.-led expulsion of this very same group almost nineteen years earlier—except this time, no shots were fired by the withdrawing U.S. and allied forces. Incredibly, zero resistance was offered. As black and white flags were raised throughout the city, signaling the triumphant return of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (“Taliban”), widespread panic erupted among Afghans and expatriates, many of whom had worked with allied forces during the war—now fearing retribution. The fall of Kabul heralded an explosive transition of power that was to become a full-blown international evacuation crisis.

The chaotic evacuation of U.S. troops and allied civilians from Kabul airport continued over several long days as the world watched in disbelief. When General Chris Donahue, the last U.S. soldier to leave Afghanistan, boarded an outbound C-17 cargo jet under the “dark of night,” his departure unceremoniously ended the “longest war” in American history [6]. General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called the war in Afghanistan a “strategic failure.” After two decades of hard-fought gains, America’s long-standing war in Afghanistan came to an ignominious end, leaving behind thousands of grief-stricken and frightened Afghans and allies, vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the Taliban government.

Evidence of how quickly and easily Afghanistan could revert to a haven for violent extremists surfaced just shy of the one-year anniversary of the U.S. evacuation of troops, when the leader of al-Qaeda, al-Zawahiri, was discovered in a private residence in Kabul, in defiance of the Doha Agreement. On July 31, 2022, President Biden announced that a U.S. drone strike had killed the al-Qaeda leader [2]. The Taliban denied knowledge of al-Zawahiri’s presence in the capital city and countered with accusations of U.S. agreement violations.

Polarizing events such as these not only place additional stress on the Taliban interim government, as it struggles to stabilize the nation and establish diplomatic relations within the international community, but also highlight the dangers of a destabilized Afghanistan. Marjorie Eastman aptly describes the global fallout of the U.S. decision to leave Afghanistan when she writes, “The reflection of that epic failure leaves little room for exaggeration on the ripple effect that took place over the last year. With the Taliban’s swift overthrow of the government, evil retribution ensued for American allies left behind enemy lines, to the loss of trust in American leadership and hegemony” [4].

The gravity of the events surrounding the U.S. invasion, occupation, and withdrawal from Afghanistan demand prudent and swift analysis of the strategic flaws and successes that powered the “longest war” and ended it so precariously. Were there, in fact, alternative approaches that could have preserved the “hard-fought” gains and achievements of two decades of American nation-building, while better demonstrating America’s honor, humanity, and fundamental core values for which it stands? These and other hard questions must now be addressed to extract vital lessons that can inform U.S. policy in post-war Afghanistan and other conflict-affected countries. Identifying what went wrong in Afghanistan and what went right will be critical as well to situating future U.S. responses within the broader context of the modern Great Power Competition (GPC).

Lessons from Afghanistan: America’s Longest War gathers prominent scholars, experts, leaders, and decision-makers from around the globe to address these challenging questions. From decades of research and experience, the authors in this collection of essays argue that the U.S. must utilize lessons from the War in Afghanistan to inform U.S. foreign policy; first, to honor our promises to the Afghan people and to the victim of 9/11; second, to compete more effectively in the modern Great Power Competition; and third, to assess the efficacy of top-down “western-style” nation-building. This chapter opens the discussion by suggesting that a lack of U.S. strategic patience and missed opportunities to develop a sustainable economy based on Afghanistan’s vast natural resources, resulted in a failure to “win the hearts and minds” of the Afghan people—effecting the final blow to U.S. efforts in Afghanistan.

Specifically, a radically centralized and tactical economic development strategy, focused on short-term transactional aims and enacted mainly from within the “Kabul bubble,” neglected the needs of ordinary Afghans living outside of urban centers [18]. As it became increasingly obvious to these populations, in desperate need of jobs, that economic development was aimed at urban-centric projects, a mistrust of “western intentions” spread, particularly among rural communities that comprise the bulk of the Afghan nation. This pervasive mistrust ultimately undermined the confidence of Afghan troops, who, in the end, were unwilling to fight for a foreign cause they could no longer believe in [19]. Short-term tactical solutions to strategic problems not only hindered the realization of long-term U.S. objectives and contributed to the present Afghan humanitarian crisis but left an opportune void for rival powers China and Russia to fill [8].

Thus, it was a lethal trifecta of top-down, centralized development strategies, missed opportunities for cooperation with other regional actors, and a lack of U.S. “strategic patience” that ultimately destroyed two decades of hard-fought gains in Afghanistan. According to the recent SIGAR report, *Why the Afghan Government Collapsed*, “The U.S. government consistently underestimated the amount of time required to rebuild Afghanistan and created unrealistic timelines and expectations that prioritized spending quickly. These choices increased corruption and reduced the effectiveness of programs” [19]. The last twenty years have only reinforced past lessons that such short-term, transactional strategies for “nation building” simply do not work in devastated conflict-affected regions like Afghanistan. Conversely, there is

ample historical evidence for the efficacy of long-term constructivist approaches that employ strategic patience, such as the U.S. Marshall Plan enacted during post-WWII reconstruction.

As a fragile Afghanistan continues to suffer an unprecedented humanitarian crisis including mass starvation—the U.S. enters a new era of Great Power Competition in the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA) region. If the U.S. ultimately fails to meet its prior obligations to the Afghan people during this time of adversity, the resulting injury to U.S. global influence could be incalculable. China will continue to capitalize on fragile post-war conditions and anti-U.S. rhetoric in the region through its Belt and Road Initiative, leaving the U.S. significantly weakened and unable to compete successfully on the global playing field.

This chapter examines how twenty years of missed opportunities and short-term tactical solutions in Afghanistan undermined reconstruction efforts and cost the U.S. precious assets and positioning in the region and the wider GPC. While this chapter aims to highlight the specific flaws and missteps and their resulting consequences, it also seeks to offer realistic hope that these lessons can be parlayed into reinvigorated U.S. engagement in Afghanistan, through strategic economic cooperation, intervention, and facilitation.

2 Missed Opportunities: A Failure to Capitalize on Afghanistan's Vast Natural Resources

Throughout history, Afghanistan's geostrategic location has proven vital to great powers. Its wealth of natural resources, particularly critical minerals, should render this landlocked nation a natural focal point in the CASA region for U.S. strategic cooperation, consensus building, and resource sharing. Yet, the theory of the "resource curse," furthered by international development institutions, alongside logistical and security challenges, has deterred investors from developing the Afghan mining sector. During the last two decades, the U.S. failed to strategically develop and adequately capitalize on the Afghan mineral sector. According to a recent SIGAR report, "US efforts in Afghanistan's extractives industry presented one of the greatest opportunities for the Afghan government to generate royalty income, grow its economy, and provide meaningful employment" [17]. Further, "SIGAR found that U.S. agencies did not perform required oversight of the programs and that the programs did not meet their goals due, in part, to the same challenges that plagued previous U.S. efforts in the sector" [17]. The report also suggests that the "USAID, [U.S. Geological Survey] (USGS), and [Commercial Law Development Program Department of Commerce] (CLDP), did not conduct required program oversight for [Extractives Technical Assistance] (ETA) and [Multi-Dimensional Economic and Legal Reform Assistance] (MELRA). Specifically, USAID and USGS did not develop a Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) plan for the ETA program, including performance indicators, as USAID's Automated Directives System (ADS)

required” [17]. According to economic expert Shabir Bashiri, this was exacerbated by the fact that, “in the 20 years of US presence, there was no developmental and infrastructural strategy or plan” [1].

These reports support the central claim of this chapter that though the U.S. invested ample resources in technical capacity building, it was unable to fully develop the Afghan economy due to its tactical and overly complicated bureaucratic approach. Alongside, or even *before*, tactical and technical aspects of Afghan resource development were addressed, essential transport infrastructure, required for regional market connectivity and trade facilitation, should have been developed. Thus, the U.S. missed vital opportunities to capitalize on Afghan natural resources—not due to a lack of technical capacity-building projects, but rather, a lack of strategic vision. Rest assured, Russia and China will not forgo these same opportunities now that the U.S. has left Afghanistan [3].

As the international community observed the harrowing events leading up to and during the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in late 2021, China stepped in and acted, quickly filling the void left by the U.S. Continued lack of U.S. engagement in the region is detrimental, not only to Afghanistan but also to U.S. national security and geopolitical competition. Allowing China to gain preferential access to Afghan natural resources such as lithium, when it already possesses the critical and rare earth minerals near monopoly, will gravely shift geopolitical power in China’s favor, given the current momentum of its existing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Strategic minerals like lithium are essential to industry, military, and civilian uses and have no viable substitutes. For nearly two decades, U.S. intervention in Afghanistan kept the BRI from any serious attempts to claim the untapped resources of this landlocked nation. However, with the U.S. exempted and the region’s geopolitical climate changing, Afghanistan, with its vast wealth of natural resources, is again within China’s orbit. At this juncture, supplying weight to a rival power’s almost complete monopoly of critical resources only impairs the GPC equilibrium further.

China, the largest hegemon in the region, is particularly eager to fill the vacuum left by the U.S. in Afghanistan. This eagerness may be seen in the speed with which China offered humanitarian assistance to the Taliban, the first foreign power to do so, thus establishing itself as a “principal partner” of the *de facto* Afghanistan government. The relationship continues to expand, with China’s ambassador, Wang Yu, publicly emphasizing the great power’s strategic approach, “as Afghans are good neighbors, brothers, and partners, China will stand firm on the concept of community with the shared future for mankind, guided by the global development initiative and global security initiative. China will substantially enhance bilateral cooperation in all areas” [5]. Only six days into 2023, China began to fulfill its recent promise as, “A Chinese company signed a \$540 million deal with Afghanistan to develop an oil-and-gas field, as Beijing moves to secure access to the country’s vast mineral wealth after the exit of American troops” [15].

Concrete evidence of such enhanced cooperation in the region is most apparent in China’s BRI regional integration strategy that currently encompasses 146 nations. This transcontinental collaboration aims to connect the region in all directions to increase trade and economic growth. As involvement in the BRI continues to expand,

the possibility of the U.S. being shut out of a region that possesses vast critical and rare earth minerals becomes an alarming reality. China already claims the overwhelming monopoly of these essential resources, which presents a challenge to our national security.

Further, in 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping went on record to assure Russian President Vladimir Putin that China was “ready to go hand in hand” with Russia. Despite Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, strong alliances between the two countries are likely to continue. News agencies for both countries reported that this alliance would “almost double their trade over the next five years, hitting \$200 billion by 2024 compared to \$107 billion in 2018, by implementing collaborative projects in energy, industry, and agriculture [in the region]” [16]. Like China, Russia recognizes an opportunity for a stronger foothold in CASA to reinforce its own geopolitical positioning and the vital need for critical resources. Russia currently seeks foreign investments of “1.5 billion to develop further and expand its own rare earth mineral industry to become the second largest rare-earth producer after China by 2030” [14].

Like China, Russia recognizes the geostrategic importance of Afghanistan. Following the fall of Kabul, President Putin quickly detailed terms for recognizing the legitimacy of the Taliban along with its resolve to “act regardless of what the United States and everybody else may think” [7]. Further, the U.S. must consider the regional impacts of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The attack “sent a shock wave across all [of] Central Asia, as indeed it did to all of the new states that were formerly part of the USSR, which incited a response from regional powers that shifted the geopolitical landscape further” [20].

If there is any remaining doubt about the geostrategic value of Central Asian nations, the U.S. need only look at recent history. The countries that were once Soviet states have been targeted as “Russia, with steady persistence, has tried to lure them [the five CIS nations] back into its sphere of influence, if not of direct control, through economic and security alliances.” Additionally, the U.S. and Europe have worked to develop them as market economies and implant civil society and democratic institutions there. China, meanwhile, has assigned them key roles in its Belt and Road Initiative and loaned them billions to develop economic strengths that complement China’s own” [20].

From this perspective, the modern GPC in the CASA Region constitutes a competition for access to a finite supply of critical and rare earth minerals; with Afghanistan quickly becoming ground zero for its wealth of untapped natural resources. As rival powers China and Russia already have a distinct advantage, the U.S. could be summarily excluded from the massive economic development already underway in CASA. Yet, “strategic competition,” as first put forth by President Biden in 2021, offers hope for renewed U.S. engagement in fragile and post-conflict regions like Afghanistan—that can be aimed squarely at resource development and economic integration through great power cooperation. The 2021 National Security Strategic Guidance expressly states, “strategic competition does not, and should not, preclude working with China when it is in our national interest to do so.”

Terms such as “geopolitical competition” and “transformative cooperation” figure prominently in the latest National Security Strategy as well, committing the U.S. to

outmaneuver China and Russia's expansionist ambitions in places such as Central Asia and Afghanistan. The 2022 NSS further emphasizes the role of strategic cooperation, iterating, "to preserve and increase international cooperation in an age of competition, we will pursue a dual-track approach. On one track, we will cooperate with any country, including our geopolitical rivals, that is willing to work constructively with us to address shared challenges. We will also fully engage with, and work to strengthen, international institutions."

In particular, the NSS commits the U.S. to seek these areas of cooperation with competitors such as China from a position of strength. To that end, the U.S. can most effectively compete by fashioning a foreign policy in the region based on soft power and trade-oriented economic strategies. Now that the U.S. has abandoned kinetics-based operations in Afghanistan, it can effectively apply lessons learned over the past twenty years to transition to strategic economic competition in the region. Further, the U.S. can play a vital role as a convener and peacebuilder in CASA to increase its national security and strengthen its overall positioning, specifically by facilitating public-private partnerships that support the extraction and commercialization of Afghan minerals. Critically, acting as such can regain the trust and participation of local Afghan populations, who are crucial to sustainable development and will benefit immediately from local mining industry job growth.

However, if the U.S. remains on its current policy trajectory in Afghanistan or is too slow to engage, alternative future scenarios are likely grim. The probable outcome is China's utter domination of the region, including preferential access to critical minerals such as lithium. Lessons learned from failed Afghanistan reconstruction efforts highlight the need for greater U.S. cooperation, economic intervention, and facilitation among and with regional stakeholders to produce and bring Afghan minerals to market most effectively. Over the past twenty years, failure to do so has resulted in a diminished position on the GPC playing field in the CASA region and new challenges to U.S. national security.

3 A Devastating Misstep: A Failure to Win Hearts and Minds

Since the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2021 and the resulting powershift, Afghanistan has struggled with a collapsed economy, humanitarian crisis, and severe drought that has highlighted and amplified the lack of sustainable development in Afghanistan. Afghans lack sufficient food, education, healthcare, jobs, and essential infrastructure. These factors have rendered the country extremely vulnerable to violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and the proliferation of the illegal drug trade. Decades of traditional aid from the U.S. have not succeeded in ameliorating these woes, and the consequences radiate outward to affect global security and stability. In large part, this was due to radically centralized development strategies that spawned a lack of trust among local populations and failed to "win the hearts and minds" of ordinary Afghan

constituents. As rural communities became increasingly aware that they would be left out of significant reconstruction projects, U.S. and NATO intentions were called into question, and the critical participation of local Afghan entities waned.

This section explores how missed opportunities to build trust and stabilize Afghanistan through regional trade facilitation jeopardized the future of Afghanistan and U.S. national security, by allowing rival powers to capitalize on vulnerabilities. The central lesson here, is that durable economic development in Afghanistan cannot take hold without the cooperation and participation of great powers and local entities alike. As this section highlights, Afghanistan has been dependent on foreign aid since the nineteenth century, when the British provided large subsidies to Afghan Emirs. Afghanistan's debilitating dependence on foreign aid has extended to the present day, with the U. S.'s expenditure of over a trillion dollars on overall aid to Afghanistan from 2002 to 2021. This dependence on foreign aid, with its influx of cash and a lack of "accountability to its citizens as well as a lack of oversight from its donors," created a rentier state that Fryland describes as "fueling a culture of corruption never previously seen in Afghanistan."

Missed opportunities to successfully integrate Afghanistan into the global economic ecosystem undermined the nation's potential to become the "Heart of Asia." Conversely, the successful framing of a new narrative in Afghanistan as the heart of a modern silk road ecosystem could have eased the economic impact of U.S. military withdrawal and allowed for the gradual decrease of international aid. Such an occurrence would have allowed the U.S. to shift its vital resources to geopolitical competition with Russia and China. Instead, following the 2021 U.S. withdrawal, the nation has devolved into the "black hole" of Asia, where narcotics trafficking and opium production increasingly dominate its landscape—threatening the entire region and global community once again.

While modern Afghanistan's many challenges can be traced back to its landlocked geography, central location, and isolation, these very features might have become the basis for this nation's transformation into the nexus of a budding Silk Road trade ecosystem. Instead, the U.S. seems to have hit replay on its unsavory legacy in Vietnam. Did the U.S. earnestly compare twenty-first-century nation-building goals in Afghanistan with the unwanted historical outcomes of Vietnam? Did the U.S. take those hard-won experiences into Afghanistan? Surely there were lessons learned from strategies that served the U.S. well and those that did not. Such defining questions must be honestly addressed, as any hope of redirecting the present U.S. legacy in Afghanistan is quickly passing, while the Central Region recollects itself and great powers and regional actors seize new opportunities to benefit their individual interests.

Any reasonable strategic response based on sound foreign policy demands understanding what went wrong with the approach to nation-building in Afghanistan. Most critically, we must ask if top-down "western-style" nation-building in a landlocked country of such diverse peoples was sufficiently aimed at serving the Afghan people. Was there a genuine understanding of the fundamental needs of local populations, or were reconstruction efforts modeled on a particular idea of what this nation should look like? Were sufficient efforts made to elevate this nation from its failed

status by connecting it to its neighbors? Finally, did the U.S. forge enduring relationships that will sustain us as China and Russia move in to fill the vacuum? The U.S. must engage these pressing questions from a strategic and humanitarian perspective equally. Answers to such questions about the War in Afghanistan will not only critically impact U.S. future foreign policy but influence U.S. future diplomatic relations on the world stage.

If the U.S. approaches the war in Afghanistan from a broader vantage, it may discover that the key is in fact *perspective*. Afghanistan was not necessarily approached as a strategic long-ranging initiative but principally a *tactical* mission, essentially fought one year at a time. As with Vietnam, the U.S. relied primarily on superior military might and resources to accomplish mission objectives, and, as with Vietnam, it did not fully achieve its intended goals. Like Vietnam, the chaotic exit from Afghanistan represents the unsettling reality that the ideals we value so highly in the West may not always translate to other cultures. According to McNamara and VanDeMark, “in Vietnam, we acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation ... we were wrong, terribly wrong” [11]. Can the same be said about Afghanistan? This reality should serve as a reminder that the world cannot be viewed through a singular ideological lens. In today’s interconnected and increasingly complex global landscape, we must be especially cognizant of the larger context.

Indeed, the U.S. entered Afghanistan with the noblest of intentions to help the Afghan people by providing generous humanitarian and military assistance. The U.S. staved off imminent mass starvation, built clinics, hospitals, and schools for children throughout the country, and bolstered rights for Afghan women. In the first years of the war alone, the U.S. vaccinated 4.26 million children against measles and polio, likely preventing 20,000 deaths. It rehabilitated and built highways, roads, bridges, airports, irrigation networks, and courthouses. It initiated potable-water supply projects and municipal water systems in major cities. It brought electricity to rural villages and cities alike. It entirely rebuilt the Afghan national security forces and funded local and national elections. The list of aid, progress, and achievements goes on. Yet, despite these efforts, the U.S. still did not manage to entirely win over the ordinary Afghan people. Why? Why did these efforts fail to transform the Afghan nation into the western vision of a stabilized way of life? The U.S. must ask if it fully understood the practical needs and goals of the Afghan people, and if it was sufficiently committed to seeing the task of nation-building in such a challenging and devastated country through to full fruition.

U.S. efforts in Afghanistan focused largely on various beneficial short-term projects without first creating a strong foundation for economic durability. Initiatives for essential infrastructure projects, which were, and still are, desperately required for market connectivity, were not implemented sufficiently. According to Shah, “American experts a decade ago estimated the value of Afghanistan’s mineral resources at \$1 trillion, which include rare-earth minerals now used in electric cars. While war raged, this potential wealth was never [effectively] exploited [15]. More critically, most development projects were oriented toward urban centers and failed to benefit ordinary Afghans nationwide with much-needed jobs. In truth, the U.S. vision of

victory, namely, the acculturation of “western” ideals, is only one version of what victory in Afghanistan might have looked like.

True nation-building is never a straightforward affair. Winning the hearts and minds of a diverse population of people requires nuanced strategic vision and a bird’s eye perspective of needs and wants. Vietnam and Afghanistan both offer ample proof of this. The U.S. largely overlooked that Afghanistan is a landlocked country, a geographic feature that makes the nation dependent upon its neighbors. Could facilitating regionalist economic alliances have better strengthened Afghanistan against insurgency? The key question now is how the U.S. move forward in Afghanistan. More, how does the U.S. productively re-engage to fulfill its original, vital mission there?

Currently, China offers the greatest prospect for Afghan regional integration through its Belt and Road Initiative. However, the U.S. can still compete and cooperate effectively in the region by utilizing its “convening power” to develop sustainable resource development and economic alliances between Afghanistan and its neighbors. In so doing, the U.S. can ostensibly safeguard preferential access to critical Afghan resources, maintain a balance of power in the region, and capitalize on the fact that Afghanistan is likely “the safest it has been in decades to develop Afghan mining and oil projects” [15]. Finally, such positive re-engagement, framed by lessons learned over the past two decades, could win back the hearts and minds of the Afghan people—who, against all odds, still hope for a future that offers employment, healthcare, education opportunities, and sustainable economic autonomy.

The following from George Marshall’s famous speech in 1947 denotes the heart of durable reconstruction strategies—“the remedy lies in breaking the vicious circle and restoring the confidence of the European people in the economic future of their own countries and of Europe as a whole. The manufacturer and the farmer throughout wide areas must be able and willing to exchange their products for currencies the continuing value of which is not open to question.” Marshall’s astute observations on the restorative power of economic self-reliance could just as aptly be applied to the Afghan people today—demoralized and broken after decades of conflict.

4 A “Strategic” Way Forward

Hope for Afghanistan and the region lies in establishing durable economic integration fueled by shared prosperity. If any lesson should be learned from nearly two decades of war in Afghanistan, it is that this volatile and fragile region requires great powers and regional actors to cooperate on shared challenges while competing on many nuanced levels to achieve such ends. Sustainable geopolitical competition today appears more relational than ever, and isolationist strategies no longer offer a safe haven in today’s profoundly interconnected world. Self-assessment regarding America’s “longest war” is imperative because the missteps and challenges are not exclusive to U.S. engagement in Afghanistan. The discussions presented in this

chapter, and the following chapters of this volume, can help guide U.S. strategies to navigate the modern GPC amidst shifting power structures. Ideally, lessons learned during America's "longest war" will inform policymakers at home and abroad to develop more holistic approaches, including strategies that serve all populations, even those who may not share similar value systems.

Further, this chapter has highlighted that the U.S. can still rebuild a meaningful presence in Afghanistan to facilitate regional stability through cooperative economic intervention. Establishing such a presence will require a willingness to engage in strategic cooperation with rival powers, like China, to effectively connect Afghanistan with regional and global markets. Multilateral cooperation is the first step in developing a stable and prosperous Afghanistan—free from its daunting legacy of crisis and aid dependency.

Finally, we must be willing to embrace the hard lessons learned in Afghanistan, honestly, confront what must be changed, and then be willing to act. U.S. foreign policy and geopolitical tactics must be reanalyzed to ascertain what works in this interconnected, twenty-first-century global environment. Afghanistan's unmitigated crisis of aid dependency continues to destabilize the entire region, urgently calling for the U.S. and other great powers to work in concert to unlock this landlocked nation's full potential as the "Heart of Asia."

When viewed through the geopolitical lens of great power competition, it becomes abundantly clear that Afghanistan and the wider region pose strategic challenges that cannot be effectively met with short-term tactical solutions. After all, as noted by Starr and Farhadi in *Finish the Job: Jumpstart Afghanistan's Economy*, "... if the economy stabilizes and resumes a path of sustainable growth, levels of political and security tensions will subside. Thus, economic development in Afghanistan is not something to be pursued after political stability and security have been established; rather, it is what must be achieved in order to forge political stability and communal peace" (2012, p. 6).

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