

Adib Farhadi
Anthony J. Masys *Editors*

The Great Power Competition Volume 4

Lessons Learned in Afghanistan:
America's Longest War

 Springer

About this book

Lessons Learned from Afghanistan: America's Longest War examines the lessons of how America's "longest war" came to an ignominious end with staggering consequences for the United States and the Afghan nation. Afghanistan today faces an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, looming threat of a civil war and a resurgence of violent extremism organizations similar to pre-9/11. As the U.S. enters a new era in the strategic geopolitical Great Power Competition, an analysis of the original mission intent, shifting policy and strategic objectives, and ineffective implementation of security, political and economic programs reveal critical lessons and questions such as: What led to the "strategic failure" of the U.S. in Afghanistan? What decisions resulted in the present-day humanitarian, civil, and political crises in Afghanistan? Were these consequences in fact avoidable? Was there an alternative approach that could have maintained the hard-fought gains of the last two decades, and better demonstrated America's standing as a defender of global human rights?

Lessons Learned from Afghanistan: America's Longest War further explores lessons of the past negotiations between the United States, Taliban, and former U.S. backed Afghan government to suggest alternative pathways that honor the original intent of the mission and meet present-day obligations to an Afghan nation in crisis.

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Preface

On August 20, 1998, in response to the U.S. embassy terror attacks in Kenya and Tanzania, President Clinton launched *Operation Infinite Reach* by deploying cruise missiles to destroy al-Qaeda positions in Afghanistan. The attack inaugurated the first official military action in U.S. history on this landlocked nation, situated at the heart of Asia. The event likely marked the first time most Americans had ever heard of al-Qaeda; yet a mere three years later, when President George W. Bush declared a Global War on Terror in response to the 9/11 terror attacks, the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and its leader, Osama bin Laden, had all become household names. The resulting 2001 *Operation Enduring Freedom*, aimed to root out and destroy al-Qaeda and any group harboring them; and for the first time in its history, NATO invoked Article 5—the principle of collective defense. This act of solidarity firmly united the U.S. and its allies against global terrorism. From this initial special operations mission, the war on terror morphed into “the longest war” in American history, a conflict that spanned twenty years and four presidencies—*five* including President Clinton’s.

The War on Terror eventually expanded into the U.S. invasion of Iraq to defeat Saddam Hussain and stabilize the country for the Iraqi people. However, the mission degenerated into a quagmire of insurgency that ultimately thwarted U.S.-led nation-building efforts. In 2011, President Obama ended the war in Iraq to shift U.S. attention to the “good war”¹ in Afghanistan, which itself was on the verge of becoming a quagmire. President Obama deployed more than 100,000 troops (at its peak, there were 130,000 NATO and other allied forces from 43 countries)² to eradicate the Taliban insurgency and end the war. That same year, Osama bin Laden was killed by U.S. special operations forces at his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. This victory against terror, however, did not accomplish the end goal. Osama bin Laden was swiftly succeeded by his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the Afghan War continued.

¹ Landler, Mark, “The Afghan War and the Evolution of Obama”, January 1, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/01/world/asia/obama-afghanistan-war.html>.

² Shadi Khan Saif, “9,592 troops of 36 countries serving in Afghanistan” *Anadolu Agency*, April 17, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/9-592-troops-of-36-countries-serving-in-afghanistan/2212251>.

When President Trump took office, he called the war in Afghanistan a “total disaster”³ and, like his predecessors, vowed to destroy al-Qaeda. Yet even President Trump’s deployment of the “mother of all bombs,” considered one of the largest non-nuclear weapons in use by the U.S. military, did not achieve that end. Instead, in a surprise move in February 2020, President Trump directly negotiated with the Taliban and signed the Doha Agreement to end the Afghan war. The Doha Agreement called for the complete withdrawal of all American troops by August 30, 2021. When President Biden inherited the agreement in early 2021, he chose to honor the terms of the complete withdrawal. Both administrations seemed to understand that eradicating terror and establishing durable stability and peace in Afghanistan could not be achieved through tactical means alone. As if to underscore this point, on August 15, 2021, the same Taliban that had been so easily ousted in 2001, marched victoriously back into the capital city of Kabul and seized the entire country before American troops had even departed.

Thus, the U.S. war in Afghanistan ended tragically amid frenzied evacuation efforts at Kabul airport. The world watched in disbelief as American and NATO troops departed, leaving behind crowds of terrified men, women, and children desperate to accompany them. Scene after shocking scene emerged of individuals clinging to C-17 aircraft in an attempt to escape, only to fall to their deaths as the planes became airborne.⁴ In the face of such unabated horror, the Afghan War was immediately deemed a “strategic failure,”⁵ an admission that drew a painful parallel to another “unmitigated failure”⁶ in U.S. history—the Vietnam War.

Both wars challenged the U.S. beyond the battlefield with issues such as “western-style” nation-building, insurgencies, regional geopolitics, and illegal narcotics trade. How did two separate U.S. wars and nation-building efforts yield equally unfortunate outcomes, as if no lessons had been learned and applied in the five decades that separated them, despite substantial technological advancements and other military successes? This, and other urgent questions regarding U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, must now be earnestly addressed.

How is it possible that after all the blood and treasure, a staggering loss of life, and nearly two trillion spent—the U.S. faces many of the same challenges to its national security and global standing as before 9/11? How could this U.S.-led, global mission fail to yield the desired outcome, despite protracted efforts to ensure victory? Could the twenty years of hard-fought gains have been preserved and a catastrophic withdrawal avoided through more strategic patience, planning, and execution? What about the impact on those left behind, who served, and died, to achieve the goal

³ Diaz, Daniella, “A history of Trump’s thoughts on Afghanistan” CNN, August 21, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/21/politics/history-president-trump-remarks-afghanistan-tweets>.

⁴ Porter, Tom, “Photos and videos appear to show Afghans trying to flee the Taliban falling out of planes as they leave Kabul airport” Business Insider, August 16, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/kabul-airport-people-fall-from-planes-leaving-afghanistan-videos-photos-2021-8>

⁵ Lubold, G. and Youssef, N.A. “Gen. Milley calls Afghan withdrawal ‘strategic failure’ in heated senate hearing” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 28, 2021, [WSJ.com](https://www.wsj.com)

⁶ Gentile, G.P. “Vietnam: Ending the Lost War”, *Between War and Peace: How America Ends Its Wars*, Matthew Moten (ed) pg 260 (259–280)

of eradicating the terror responsible for 9/11? What of the millions of Afghans abandoned and left on the brink of starvation? Did we adequately plan for the safety of those who supported U.S. efforts and fulfill the promises made to them, especially the Afghan women? Why did the U.S. ultimately fail to “win the hearts and minds” of the Afghan people? Finally, has abandoning Afghanistan irrevocably damaged U.S. global credibility, influence, trust, and the equilibrium of Great Power Competition in the region?

These are just some of the compelling questions the authors address in this book. The long and tumultuous course of America’s Longest War in Afghanistan demands further rigorous academic scrutiny to better inform future strategic engagements, missions, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. We must especially understand the vital interplay between geopolitical, security, economic, religious, cultural, and ethnic dimensions that critically impacted Afghan War efforts and which continue to affect the modern Great Power Competition today. China and Russia are moving quickly to fill the region’s void and shift the balance of power on the geopolitical and economic battlefield of the Central Region. *Lessons from Afghanistan: America’s Longest War* offers forward-looking suggestions that incorporate key lessons learned over the past two decades, to better inform U.S. re-engagement in this vital region.

Only when these lessons are learned and applied in earnest to create a new way forward can original U.S. objectives in Afghanistan be achieved and present-day obligations to a nation in crisis be met. Only then can “the longest war” in American history be considered a success.

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