



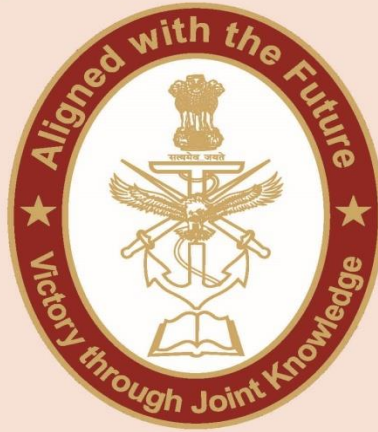
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ISSUE BRIEF

AFGHANISTAN: A TORMENTED LAND PART I: WHY THE CHAOTIC, ABRUPT WITHDRAWAL OF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ASSISTANCE FORCE (ISAF) FROM AFGHANISTAN?

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PART I: WHY THE CHAOTIC, ABRUPT WITHDRAWAL OF INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ASSISTANCE FORCE (ISAF) FROM AFGHANISTAN?



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Note: This is a two-part Issue Brief titled *“Afghanistan: A Tormented Land”*

Part II: “Where is Afghanistan Heading?” can be accessed here:

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Prologue. While the world is focussed on numerous tumultuous geo-political events and fires/wars like belligerent China, Ukraine, Syria, Middle-East, Pakistan, and Africa, it has once again forgotten Afghanistan and left it to its misery. The losers as usual are the people of Afghanistan specially the women and children. Whatever democratic and developmental progress was made, is being steadily eroded by the Taliban, which cannot change like the proverbial tail of a dog. History is a witness that Afghanistan is likely to erupt again, in the not so distant future, in case palliative multi-domain treatment is not urgently provided. This two-part article examines why the abrupt, chaotic withdrawal of ISAF happened, and in Part II, the prevailing situation in Afghanistan, with few recommendations to arrest the slide are laid out.

A Dark Spot in Modern Geo-Political and Military History. The US and its allies' involvement in Afghanistan for over 20 years has seen a historic nadir, rarely witnessed geo-politically. From a trillion-dollar surge, coupled with over 130000 troops of different nationalities (at its height, the force was more than 130,000 strong with troops from 50 NATO and partner countries), to being forgotten by the West, re-engaging strongly, but gradually declining to a barely functioning figure of 2500 troops, and finally culminating in an abrupt chaotic desertion. It concluded with the re-

establishment of the Taliban government with the active support of USA, which during that period had continued to classify the Taliban as a terrorist organisation. They not only negotiated with officially designated terrorists, but agreed to them governing the country; ironically without allowing the government in place supported by USA, to even participate in the negotiations. If this is not the most disturbing and surreal episode in the history of geo-politics, and modern military history and intervention, one will be hard put to find any. Incredulously, we have managed to match it with events in Syria, Ethiopia, even Ukraine. The human and budgetary costs are \$2.313 trillion, and 243000 fatal casualties¹. This does not include indirect costs such as medical care for veterans, and humanitarian aid, which will raise the costs substantially.

Everchanging Afghanistan Action Plan: Strategic Plans were Event and Personality based. Who would believe that the development strategy in 2002, described the Afghans as committed to “an accountable, broad-based, multi-ethnic, representative government” based on “respect for human rights.” Condoleezza Rice did a volte face very shortly stating that terrorism from Afghanistan posed “an existential threat to our security²”. **It has been a classic case of ‘fitting the logic to a predetermined conclusion’!** Every event or recommendation appeared to be in hyperbole, with a common theme of terrible implications of failure and strategic necessity of success at all costs. **As more troops got deployed, more died, and more billions got spent, which made extreme justifications ‘routine’.** The situation worsened, more so because the West led by USA, were addressing the wrong issues from their perspective, and not through a localised prism. So, called military and geo-political experts even forecasted that Pakistan would fall to extremist hands if Taliban succeeded. Osama Bin Laden became an obsession, winning the fight against terrorism and Taliban was considered an imperative, with President Obama stating that ‘Failure was not an option’³. Cut to the adversary, for the local warlords and Taliban, the more visible and kinetic power deployed by IASF, the more effective their message of leading a jihad for Islam and Afghanistan, urging fence-sitters to join them.

Why did the Chaotic Withdrawal Happen? This story starts with President Trump signing an ‘Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan’, commonly known as the US-Taliban deal or the Doha Agreement, between the United States and the Taliban on February 29, 2020. It did not involve the Afghan government. **While there are other conditions to the Deal, the most important commitment was withdrawal of Coalition Forces completely within 14 months following the announcement of this joint declaration.** The US/ISAF completed its full evacuation on August 30, 2021, as the Taliban took control of the country by force. President Biden could have exercised flexibility in actual execution of the withdrawal plan. Two vital aspects stand out; first, due to unstable, and fragile environment, despite all the assistance (weapons, training, military support, intelligence, air support, commando training and supervision, high technology equipment like night fighting devices etc) provided to the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Police (ANP) forces, whether the fall of the government was inevitable; second, was there an appreciation of the high probability of ANA immediately collapsing on US withdrawing? As events panned out, it appears that for both aspects, the senior military commanders on ground, and political and policy

makers in USA and the Coalition force members, were certainly taken by surprise. They had appreciated till the end that the running government with a vastly superior ANA with ANP, will be able to maintain law and order, and control of territory for a much longer period of time (some estimated up to two years), once they started gradually thinning out after reaching the agreement with the Taliban.

Analysis of Senate Armed Forces Committee Hearings

Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Mark Milley and Commander of U.S. Central Command Gen Kenneth McKenzie, all spoke during the subsequent Senate Armed Services Committee Hearings⁴, with Austin commenting that, “we did not anticipate the snowball effect caused by the deals that the Taliban commanders struck with local leaders.⁵” Some of the deals themselves could have been known, but the snowball effect, part of that complex interaction of the emotions of many different individuals, locals (rural and urban) and on the ground soldiers and policemen was not fathomed, or imagined at all. It is revealing that when the Taliban were in the strongest military position in 2001, controlling or contesting nearly half of the country, the USA had only 2,500 troops on the ground, the lowest number of troops in Afghanistan, and facing the deadline of May 2021 of withdrawing ALL US and allied troops. The hearings are actually even more damning because both the policy maker (Minister of Defence) and senior military leadership (Gen Miley and other ground commanders) recommended retaining a meagre 2500 personnel on ground; which in NO way would have made a difference to the outcome of a disastrous exit. In fact, it could well have resulted in a case of déjà vu; with additional troops, equipment and money poured in just for the withdrawal. The speed with which the Taliban overran the country clearly indicates that last minute reinforcements would not have altered the story. Astonishingly, the hearings also reveal that the outgoing Administration provided no plans for how to conduct the final withdrawal or to evacuate Americans and Afghan allies. **There is a typical double speak on force levels, withdrawal plans, consultative mechanisms adopted, with a variance of views emerging from the White House, DOD and military.** Gen Milley went so far as to give two important statements; first he said “but I firmly believe in civilian control of the military, and I am required and the military commanders are required to give our best military advice, but the decision makers are not required in any manner, shape or form to follow that advice.”, and second “that the withdrawal was a strategic failure”⁶. They are very strong statements, which actually accepted that the withdrawal, force levels, chaotic end could not be foreseen/anticipated and there was a command failure. Regarding military advice, events clearly indicate that the overall commander, in this case President Biden had to take a holistic decision taking all domain advice available, and depending on only one domain advice be it political, diplomatic or military would be strategically unwise, and lead to damaging consequences as transpired.

Incorrect Assessment of ANDF by USA Intelligence Agencies. There was consensus between the intelligence assessment and the military appraisal, that the ANDSF would be able to effectively fight to defend their country and their capital, Kabul. The ANDSF had significant advantages; larger and superior numbers and

equipment: 300,000 troops compared to 80,000 Taliban fighters, an air force, and two decades of training and support. Their assessment in early 2021 was that after a complete military withdrawal, the Taliban will speed up operations to capture Kabul within a year or two. Even during May 2021, the assessment did not materially change!

Strategic Decision Making is always Multi-Domain. There are divergent reports on strategic decision making within the US civilian and military community. Both sides feel that the views of the other was given overwhelming weightage, and some of the actors involved even go as far as to say that they (military and civil administration) were not even consulted before executive orders for withdrawal were given. To be fair to President Biden, the die was cast even before his arrival, as President Trump had already entered into an agreement with the Taliban (without involving the Afghan government in direct talks). Military leaders must obviously provide the best advise at the strategic and operational level as per their understanding of the ground and region, but this will form one part of the incomplete story which needs to be filled by the diplomats, economic and political advisors⁷. While Afghanistan (and even Iraq and Syria) may appear more of a military intervention, they have resoundingly confirmed that it is just the beginning of securing and bringing stability to an unstable nation/region. Human and material costs, primacy of national interests, and whether it is worth it 'to weather the storm' needs constant review by the Executive Head, in this case the President of the USA. A lesson here for the Indian military is that senior military commanders at CDS and Chief level, and field commanders, must today get used to multi-domain operations and rendering advice accordingly.

The Self-Indulgent West Never Learns. In all conflict zones where the West led by USA has intervened, the planners were confident when they set out, of total success, due to a 'clearly defined mission,' and an 'exit strategy,'" writes Rory Stewart⁸. "From the very beginning, the international plans were surreally detached from the local reality." The delusion proved fatal in Afghanistan. Faltering in planning and execution, Western policymakers invariably overstated their case and once they realised their faulty judgement, they would not retreat, and instead of flexibly switching to a moderate position of a light footprint, instead lurched from extreme overreach to denial, isolationism, and withdrawal. "In the end, they walked out, blaming the chaos that followed on the corruption, ingratitude, and the supposed cowardice of their former partners⁹." It appears that the West has still not learnt their lessons, be it Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Iraq, Somalia, and even in Ukraine; being tragically visualised of NATO continuing to fight till the last Ukrainian! only the future will predict the folly once again being committed. In Afghanistan, they found it impossible to believe that with their hi-tech, disruptive kinetic and non-kinetic multi-domain systems (attack helicopters, drones, night fighting capabilities, precision munitions, cyber and information warfare capabilities) and deeply researched well thought out counter-insurgency campaigns/operations, they could not make a dent on a medieval, loosely controlled and commanded, disparate, poorly equipped and trained Taliban, who live in mud houses in hardy, barren, mountainous terrain. They clung to the narrative that they are the true knights in shining armour to create/spread/enforce democracy, harmony, freedom, and capital market practices in the world; it is an irony that they are

increasingly being seen as a group of hypocrites who have different rules/templates for themselves, and for other nation states, specially those who prefer neutrality or follow a different ideology.

Afghanistan: Always Fair Game for the Great Game. Afghanistan historically and for geo-strategic reasons has always been an epicentre for the great game between global powers; be it Great Britain and USSR in the 20th century, or USA and Russia in the 21st. Whatever be its status in terms of stability, prosperity, development; intervention has been the name of the game. The main players while the withdrawal and drawdown of forces occurred were USA, Russia, NATO, Pakistan, China, Iran, CAR and India. Each was constantly jockeying for influence and geo-strategic space, mostly at cross-roads to each other; sadly, this will continue as they all would like to have influence in Afghanistan. Some for geo-political reasons like USA for global domination, Pakistan for its strategic space, Russia and China to ensure stability in their neighbourhood (Russia in CAR and far East, China in Xinjiang region), and India wanting to ensure that Afghanistan is not used by Pakistan against her, along with the traditional, and historical linkages. Recently, discovery of rare earth, minerals and metals have added to the lure. Most nations while wanting to exploit, have never or rarely contributed towards the stability of Afghanistan. The very fact that this article on Afghanistan, is primarily focussing on other nations/powers, speaks volumes of the game's nations are playing in this benighted land.

Post Script to Afghanistan Withdrawal. With more than two decades involvement, over \$3 tn spent and over 200000 lives lost, raising equipping and training an Afghan army of 300000 soldiers, the rapidity with which Taliban rolled up Afghanistan under their control is a lesson for the international community specially the USA to study in detail. It is now obvious that only a significant, continued US and allies' military presence would have delayed/stopped the 'rout'; which would have defeated the very purpose of reducing interference/decoupling from Afghanistan. Secretary of State Austin may feel satisfied when stating that "Ultimately, President Biden refused to send another generation of Americans to fight a war that should have ended for the United States long ago", while President Biden summed it up nicely on August 31, 2021, "There is nothing low-grade or low-risk or low-cost about any war." Look where this intervention has landed Afghanistan, despite all the lofty dreams.

Conclusion. The abrupt chaotic withdrawal of ISAF was certainly a strategic failure. However, judgement on whether it was catastrophic, or has inadvertently allowed Afghanistan space and allowed Afghanistan to chart its own destiny (for good or for worse), can only be passed after a reasonable time has elapsed. A report card on where Afghanistan stands today is presented in Part II. One ends this part by stating that **'Afghanistan's history over the past century indicates that alternative forces/fronts resisting the current ruling regime, do not take long to emerge; and unfortunately, Afghanistan always beckons external actors to intervene, who use proxies to act, according to their national interest, which invariably are not aligned with Afghanistan interests.** The day Afghanistan establishes internal political

and economic stability on her own, may beckon the start of the long road to stability and prosperity, and an end to external intervention.

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¹ **‘Human and Budgetary Costs to date of The US War in Afghanistan, 2001-2022’**, Watsons Institute of International and Public Affairs, Brown University, provides a detailed breakdown, available at <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022>. Accessed on 24 May 2023.

² **‘The Unfinished War in Afghanistan -2001-2014**, by Vishal Chandra, Institute of Defence Studies and Analysis (IDSA), Pentagon Press, available at https://idsa.in/system/files/book/book_warinafghanistan.pdf. Accessed on 05 May 2023.

³ **‘Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan’**, March 27, 2009, The White House, available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-a-new-strategy-afghanistan-and-pakistan>. Accessed on 24 May 2023.

⁴ Stenographic Transcript before the **‘COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES UNITED STATES SENATE HEARING’** TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY ON THE CONCLUSION OF MILITARY OPERATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN AND PLANS FOR FUTURE COUNTERTERRORISM OPERATIONS, Tuesday, September 28, 2021, available at https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/21-73_09-28-2021.pdf. First accessed on 01 May 2023.

⁵ **‘Top defense officials acknowledge they advised against withdrawing all troops from Afghanistan’**, New York Times, by Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper, September 28, 2021, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/28/us/politics/milley-austin-afghanistan-war.html> AND **‘Generals Say They Recommended Keeping U.S. Troops In Afghanistan’**, by Barbara Sprunt, npr, available at <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/28/1040877300/austin-milley-mckenzie-senate-hearing-afghanistan>. Both accessed on 24 May 23.

⁶ **‘U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan’**, The White House, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/US-Withdrawal-from-Afghanistan.pdf>. Accessed on 18 May 2023.

⁷ **‘Afghanistan Laid Bare the Value of Military Judgments’**, Paul R. Pillar, National Interest, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/paul-pillar/afghanistan-laid-bare-value-military-judgments-194911>. Accessed on 18 May 2023.

⁸ Rory Stewart, **The Last Days of Intervention: Afghanistan and the Delusions of Maximalism’**, Nov/Dec 2021, Foreign Affairs, available at https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-10-08/last-days-intervention?utm_medium=newsletters&utm_source=fatoday&utm_campaign=The%20Last%20Days%20of%20Intervention&utm_content=20211008&utm_term=FA%20Today%20-%20112017. Accessed on 09 Oct 22.

⁹ Ibid.