



Afghanistan: 15 Years on

15 years after the US invaded Afghanistan and two years since the official end and withdrawal of US and coalition forces, Afghanistan remains marred in chaos and the US constructed architecture is struggling to survive. The Taliban continue to mount steady gains against the government in Kabul which, this week, saw them taking control of capital of the Helmand province Lashkar Gah.

In 2015, the Taliban's traditional summer offensive underscored some of the Afghan government's most worrisome security deficiencies. In September, the Taliban seized the northern city of Kunduz, and though Afghan troops recaptured the city with the help of US forces, the Taliban have maintained a presence in the country's north ever since. By the end of 2015, the Taliban controlled or had a heavy presence in roughly 30% of Afghanistan's districts. Kabul lost its grip on another 5% of its territory in the first half of 2016. Now, the Taliban hold more territory than they have had at any point since the US toppled their government in 2001.

The Afghan Army and police officials continue to trade blame over why things are going so bad. *"The police, as soon as they were inflicted with some casualties, gave up about 27 posts one after another without a fight,"* complained Third Regiment commander Col. Nematullah Khalil, adding that his troops found their posts surrounded suddenly because of the quick losses. Police Chief Lt. Col. Mohammad Omar Jan denied this, saying that the police are suffering far more casualties than anyone else, and that the army is just blaming them to cover up its own weakness in the battle, as they struggle to hold the last line of defense before the capital.

The US invaded Afghanistan under the pretext of 9/11, but always planned some level of permanent presence in Eurasia to deal with Russian and Chinese ambitions and control the hydrocarbon resources of the Caspian Sea and the Middle East. One of the reasons the US cited for invading Afghanistan was to liberate the Afghan people from the Taliban, promising to bring stability and security for the nation. However, after a decade of war the security situation remains a complete failure. The US has gone to great lengths to lay the blame squarely on Taliban attacks. However, with 130,000 troops at its peak, it has been unable to bring anything in the way of promised security. This has been fundamentally due to the US working with corrupt politicians, former warlords and opportunists who fill the Afghan government and who have been busy settling old scores and enriching themselves.

By December 2001 and on behalf of the US, the United Nations hosted the Bonn Conference in Germany. The aim was the creation of a political process which would bring all the different tribes, warlords and factions into the US constructed political setup. Participants included representatives of four Afghan opposition groups – Pushtun, Hazara, Tajik and Uzbek – all anti-Taliban groups. By the time the US began its invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Hamid Karzai, the American stooge, had been appointed the head of the interim authority and in 2004, he became the official president of Afghanistan after an election fraught with widespread fraud.

With the US marred in an insurgency in Iraq, the Taliban made a come back. Whilst the US was able to initially with considerable ease remove the Taliban from power, Stratfor outlined what really occurred: *"It is important to remember that the Taliban was never really defeated on the battlefield. Once they realized that they were no match for U.S. air power in a conventional war, they declined battle and faded away to launch their insurgency."* It was

here the US turned to regional surrogates. Iran brought stability in the North-West through building roads, power transmission lines, and border stations among other infrastructure projects. Pakistan was ordered to hunt down all the groups and tribes that supported the insurgency in Afghanistan from Pakistan's northern tribal areas. The mess in Afghanistan caused by the US soon spread to Pakistan.

By 2008, the US has begun using predator drones to target the areas on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan and into Pakistani territory. After conducting thousands of sorties, no high profile target has ever been captured. In fact, the US expanded its drone programme to include innocent villages and towns in the hope that some high profile target may show up on America's radar, whilst on the surface the Pakistani government reacted angrily to such attacks. This charade was exposed when Senator Dianne Feinstein, chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, publicly commented on where the predator aircraft patrolling Pakistan took off and landed. At the hearing in February 2009, Feinstein expressed surprise over Pakistani opposition to the campaign of Predator-launched CIA missile strikes against targets along Pakistan's Northwestern border. She [commented](#) *"As I understand it, these are flown out of a Pakistani base."*

As the US sunk in a quagmire, the Western powers, including the US, began preparing the ground for reconciliation with the Taliban. In a lengthy [message](#) on the occasion of the Eid al-Fitr in 2011, the Taliban leader Mulla Muhammed Umar confirmed that negotiations have been going with the US. This would indicate the US has accepted that it cannot defeat the Taliban and that it is negotiating with the enemy it was meant to remove. But these negotiations have never made any progress especially when the Taliban could see the weakness in the US military gaining victory.

The US reduced its troops to its lowest levels in 2014 despite declaring this a withdrawal; it maintained its bases across the country. The US handed over day-to-day security and policing to the Afghan security forces and police, including maintaining the government in Kabul despite their inability to do so. Ever since the days of the Bonn Conference in 2001, America struggled to form a functioning Afghan government whose writ extended beyond Kabul. Even the replacement of Hamid Karzai with Ashraf Ghani did little to change the incompetent governance, not surprisingly then, America has had to change its strategy and postponed its exit date several times. Finally, in May 2012, at a NATO summit in Chicago, America and its allies accepted defeat. The joint communiqué issued expressed the collective desire of all the NATO countries to draw the curtain on their Afghan misadventure. The statement read: *"After ten years of war and with the global economy reeling, the nations of the West no longer want to pay, either in treasure or in lives, the costs of their efforts in a place that for centuries has resisted foreign attempts to tame it."*

Even with thousands of American soldiers sent to Afghanistan and even with the complicity of the rulers of Pakistan with the US and with the increase in the drones attacks as well as US attempts to strike a chord with the moderate and non-moderate Taliban, Afghanistan remains sunk in a quagmire for the US.

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