America’s longest war was founded on false pretences

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Abstract

The war in Afghanistan ended as it had started, with total ambiguity of its objectives as well as what it achieved. The official Western narrative in 2001 was that “everything changed” on the day four airliners were hijacked and nearly 5,000 people murdered. The US intervention in Afghanistan, by this account, was hastily improvised in less than a month. However, the decisions shaping the US military campaign in Afghanistan in 2001 show a remarkable continuity based on an ongoing pre-September 11 evolution in the US foreign policy. As a matter of fact, the US operations in Afghanistan did not begin 20 years ago. But in 1979, during the presidency of Jimmy Carter.

The war in Afghanistan ended as it had started, with total ambiguity of its objectives as well as what it achieved. The official Western narrative in 2001 was that “everything changed” on the day four airliners were hijacked and nearly 5,000 people murdered (Montclair State University, 2021). The US intervention in Afghanistan, by this account, was hastily improvised in less than a month. However, the decisions shaping the US military campaign in Afghanistan in 2001 show a remarkable continuity based on an ongoing pre-September 11 evolution in the US foreign policy. As a matter of fact, the US operations in Afghanistan did not begin 20 years ago. But in 1979, during the presidency of Jimmy Carter. In 1998, Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter’s former National Security Advisor, defended US secret support for Islamic extremists fighting in Afghanistan:

It was July 3, 1979 that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention. . . . That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Russians into the Afghan trap. . . . We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war. . . . What is more important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?

The radical Islamization of Afghanistan began as a CIA-initiated move to unite the Muslims of the country against the occupying Soviet forces (Haslam, 2011: 324). Under the ‘Reagan Doctrine’, an estimated $3.5 billion was invested in the Afghan war efforts (Misra, 2002: 579). Although Washington stopped its arms supply to Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, it did not sever strategic links with the Islamic groups in Afghanistan. By propping up the Taliban, policy makers in Washington thought they could achieve some stable regime in Afghanistan with an anti-Shi’a movement in power, which could severely limit Iran’s influence in the region.

The American involvement in Afghanistan have been well documented in a book written by Ahmed Rashid (2010). The book, Taliban: The Power of Militant Islam in Afghanistan and Beyond, provides an acute insight into the country and its inhabitants as well as into the external powers vested in the region in a new “Great Game”. The book narrates the history of the movement, its origins, their fundamentalism, political and military leaders, internal contradictions, the opium trade, and the role of oil resources, as well as foreign interests in Afghan affairs, in particular from Pakistan, the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia,
Iran, and China. Rashid, hardly a wide-eyed radical, has been the Pakistan-Afghanistan-and-Central-Asia correspondent for the Far Eastern Economic Review and the Daily Telegraph in London. He argues that the US was desperately looking for allies and solid bases in energy-rich central Eurasia but hindered by its own embargo of Iran that began in 1980 and was forced to look for other ways of entering the complex web of Eurasian politics and economics. Sometime in 1994, as Afghanistan tumbled into disarray in the wake of the civil war that followed the 1989 Soviet withdrawal, from the jolly bunch of anti-communist fighters in Afghanistan emerged a highly secretive group of Afghan religious students and scholars, called Taliban. Its declared purpose was to restore peace, to confront crime and corruption, to enforce traditional Islamic law, and to defend the Islamic character of Afghanistan. The group enjoyed popular support with its promise of security and its religious fervour, and quickly grew into a powerful nationwide movement. By late 1996 the Taliban had seized the capital, Kabul, and secured effective control over some two-thirds of Afghanistan.

Rashid says that it was the key energy interests in using Afghanistan as a major oil transit route that led the US administration to support this young rebel movement in its search to bring stability to war-torn Afghanistan. Indeed, during the civil war, the Taliban seemed the only force capable of keeping the masses together in a fast disintegrating state. Once in power, the Taliban Movement had put a lid on unending banditry, tribal quarrels, and sectarian violence, and had disarmed much of the countryside. Some US diplomats who had opened up contact with the Taliban saw them as messianic do-gooders – like born-again Christians from the American Bible Belt (Rashid, 2010: 182). During the Soviet occupation the USA actively encouraged, even helped, the recruitment of non-Afghan Islamic mercenaries to fight against the Soviets. For much of the 1990s, the US government supported the Taliban’s rise to power, both by encouraging the involvement of US energy companies, and tolerating Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, two of its regional allies, in their financial and military backing of the Taliban.

Oil and gas are not the direct causes of the US involvement in Afghanistan but have always occupied a certain place among long-term US policy motivations. Securing control of the vast but land-locked oil and gas reserves of Central Asia was a key US policy, in particular oil and gas reserves of Turkmenistan. The shortest and cheapest export route for Turkmenistan’s vast oil and gas reserves is through Afghanistan. There were serious negotiations and some advanced planning for both oil and gas pipeline construction by US companies through Afghanistan. The key task of the US administration in “volatile Eurasia,” as described by Zbigniew Brzezinski, was “to ensure that no state or combination of states gains the ability to expel the US or even diminish its decisive role” (1997: 50–64). Brzezinski also recognized the importance of controlling the flow of energy as the key to power in Eurasia. “About 75 per cent of the world’s people live in Eurasia, and most of the world’s physical wealth is there as well, both in its enterprises and underneath its soil. Eurasia accounts for about three-fourths of the world’s known energy resources” (1997: 31).

This was the case in the 1990s and was still the same in 2001. The causes for the war in Afghanistan cannot be found by looking only at September 11 terrorist attacks, without considering this long-term strategic goal. For reasons both of world strategy and control over natural resources, the US administration was determined to safeguard a dominant position in the Eurasian heartland. The 2001 intervention was planned in detail and carefully prepared long before the September 11 terrorist attacks. The attack on September 11 provided an added incentive to the US administration to increase its grip over the region as well as to remind the world of America’s capacity for political and military control. A few days before September 11, the US Energy Information Administration reported that “Afghanistan’s significance from an energy standpoint stems from its geographical position as a potential transit route for oil and natural gas exports from central Asia to the Arabian sea. This potential includes the possible construction of oil and natural gas export pipelines through Afghanistan.”

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The hijacked planes that crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon simply provided an additional rationale for the unilateral increase in US political and military control of Afghanistan and surrounding area. The so-called war-on-terror allowed for the US military penetration into areas of the world from which it previously had been absent. During initial stages of the war in Afghanistan, the US military was able to establish 13 new military bases in bordering ex-Soviet states, with Uzbekistan as the first central Asian state to host a permanent military base in early 2002. Shortly thereafter, other bases appeared in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and the attendant policy and praxis of common military exercises reached to include distant Kazakhstan. The establishment of these military bases in early 2000s in central Asia represented a major advance for the US and ready access to the rich oil and gas resources of the Caspian Sea basin. At the same time, these military advances dampened and limited Russian influence in the area. All this also strengthened the position of the US in relation to China, a power identified since the end of the Cold War as a likely challenger to US hegemony in Eurasia. Within a week of the commencement of the war in Afghanistan, the Bush administration discussed the shape of a post-Taliban Afghan government in reference to developing oil and gas pipelines. On December 15, 2001, the New York Times reported that “the State Department is exploring the potential for post-Taliban energy projects in the region.”

When the initial fighting concluded, President Bush appointed a former aide to the American oil company UNOCAL, Afghan-born Zalmay Khalilzad, as a special envoy to Afghanistan. This nomination underscored the importance of the economic and financial interests at stake in the US campaign in Afghanistan. Before his ambassadorial appointment, Khalilzad drew up a risk analysis for a proposed gas pipeline from the former Soviet republic of Turkmenistan across Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian Ocean. So many business deals, so much oil and natural gas, all those giant multinational corporations with powerful connections to the US state. This is not a paranoid theory, but simply a convergence of political and economic interests traveling under the rubric of “war on terror”. It is not conspiracy; it is just business as usual.

US economic interests, driven by oil, had for years taken precedence over any human rights agenda. It was only after 9/11 that the US First Lady Laura Bush emerged overnight as a progressive feminist concerned about the brutal repression of Afghan women under Taliban. In fact, the US originally financed the Islamic Mujahideen upon which the Taliban built its rule as it fought against the pro-Soviet Afghan government of the late 1970s. That war pitted the fundamentalist Mujahideen against a government that allowed women access to education and employment. With the fall of this secular government, the Taliban dictatorship was free to support the exclusion of women from all public spaces and education.

From the start, there had been fundamental disagreements on the objectives of the US operation in Afghanistan within the US administration. For some, it was turning Afghanistan into a democracy and bringing a cultural change in the country. For others, the main objective was clearing Afghanistan of any terrorist organizations that posed a direct threat to the US. In fact, the presence of US and other Western forces has remained the basic cause of conflict in Afghanistan. Arguably, more lives would have been saved if the US had left Afghanistan earlier.

The Afghanistan Papers are a set of assessments of the US war in Afghanistan prepared by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and were published by the Washington Post on December 9, 2019, following a Freedom of Information Act request. According to these, 2,300 US troops were killed and 20,000 wounded. The Afghans, of course, have suffered far more. Douglas Lute, a retired three-star Army general, advised both the Bush and Obama administrations, stated in his 2015 interview with the SIGAR:
What are we trying to do here? We didn’t have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking. We never would have tolerated rosy-goal statements if we understood, and this didn’t really start happening until Obama. For example, the economy: we stated that our goal is to establish a “flourishing market economy”. I thought we should have specified a flourishing drug trade – this is the only part of the market that’s working. It’s really much worse than you think. There is a fundamental gap of understanding on the front end, overstated objectives, an overreliance on the military, and a lack of understanding of the resources necessary.

Indeed, US-led Western intervention resulted in Afghanistan becoming the world’s first true narco-state. Afghanistan’s opium production surged from around 180 tonnes in 2001 to more than 3,000 tonnes a year after the invasion, and to more than 8,000 by 2007, and 9,000 by 2018 (93% of the world’s illicit heroin supply).6

Since the US and its allies withdrew its troops, “some stirred-up Muslims” are back in power again, and it is now up to Afghans to decide the fate of their country.

Notes

1 Bulent Gokay is Professor of International Relations at Keele University
4 The “Reagan Doctrine” was used to characterize the Reagan administration’s (1981–1988) policy of supporting anti-Communist insurgents wherever they might be. In his 1985 State of the Union address, President Ronald Reagan called upon Congress and the American people to stand up to the Soviet Union, what he had previously called the “Evil Empire”: “We must stand by all our democratic allies. And we must not break faith with those who are risking their lives – on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua – to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth.” (https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/rd/17741.htm)

References