

The Rise and Retreat: U.S. Involvement in Afghanistan and Its Implications for American Foreign Policy

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Abstract

The U.S. involvement in Afghanistan (2001–2021) represents one of the most prolonged and consequential military engagements in American history. This paper examines the rise of U.S. intervention following the 9/11 attacks, the subsequent counterinsurgency efforts, and the eventual withdrawal in 2021. The study analyses the motivations for intervention, the challenges of state-building, and the impact of the Taliban's resurgence. Furthermore, it assesses the broader implications for American foreign policy, including shifts in military strategy, alliances, and global perception of U.S. interventionism. By exploring these themes, this paper argues that the Afghanistan withdrawal has reshaped U.S. strategic priorities, emphasizing diplomacy and deterrence over prolonged military occupations.

Keywords: Counterinsurgency, Intervention, Military.

Introduction

The U.S. intervention in Afghanistan was launched as a direct response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. What began as a counterterrorism mission evolved into a two-decade-long conflict involving counterinsurgency and state-building efforts. The eventual withdrawal in 2021 was marked by the swift collapse of the Afghan government, raising questions about the effectiveness of U.S. policy. This paper explores three key aspects of U.S. involvement:

1. The rise of U.S. intervention (2001–2014)
2. The retreat and withdrawal (2014–2021)
3. The broader implications for U.S. foreign policy

By analysing these dimensions, this study seeks to understand the long-term impact of the Afghanistan experience on American global strategy.

2. The Rise: U.S. Involvement in Afghanistan (2001–2014)

2.1 Motivations for Intervention

The Bush administration-initiated Operation Enduring Freedom on October 7, 2001, with the primary objective of dismantling al-Qaeda and removing the Taliban, who provided them sanctuary (Woodward, 2002). The U.S. framed the war within the broader "War on Terror," receiving support from NATO, which invoked Article 5 for the first time (NATO, 2001).

2.2 Initial Military Successes (2001–2003)

Early U.S. military operations, in coordination with Afghan Northern Alliance forces, quickly toppled the Taliban government. By December 2001, the Bonn Agreement facilitated the establishment of an interim

Afghan administration under Hamid Karzai (Rashid, 2008). However, key al-Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden, escaped to Pakistan, limiting the strategic success of the intervention (Coll, 2018).

2.3 The Shift to Counterinsurgency and State-Building (2004–2014)

As insurgency resurged, U.S. policy shifted towards counterinsurgency (COIN) and state-building. The 2009 surge under President Obama increased U.S. troop presence by 30,000 to stabilize the country (Gates, 2014). Despite temporary gains, corruption, governance issues, and Taliban resilience undermined efforts (Rubin, 2013).

3. The Retreat: U.S. Withdrawal and the Fall of Kabul (2014–2021)

3.1 U.S. Troop Drawdown and the Doha Agreement (2014–2020)

Under President Obama, the U.S. shifted towards a gradual troop reduction, transferring security responsibilities to Afghan forces. The Trump administration signed the 2020 Doha Agreement with the Taliban, setting conditions for withdrawal in exchange for counterterrorism commitments (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

3.2 The Collapse of the Afghan Government (2021)

Despite years of U.S. support, Afghan security forces disintegrated as the Taliban rapidly captured provincial capitals. Kabul fell on August 15, 2021, leading to chaotic evacuations and a humanitarian crisis (BBC, 2021). The failure of Afghan governance and military capability raised significant questions about U.S. state-building efforts (Byman, 2021).

3.3 The Taliban's Return and Regional Impact

The Taliban's return resulted in a rollback of women's rights, press freedoms, and international aid access. Concerns remain about Afghanistan becoming a haven for extremist groups such as ISIS-K (Felbab-Brown, 2021).

4. Implications for American Foreign Policy

4.1 Shift from Military Intervention to Strategic Deterrence

The Afghanistan withdrawal marked a pivot from prolonged military engagements to strategic deterrence. The Biden administration emphasized "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism, minimizing direct military occupation (White House, 2021).

4.2 Impact on U.S. Alliances and Global Credibility

The disorderly withdrawal raised concerns among NATO allies and strategic partners regarding U.S. reliability. European leaders, including President Emmanuel Macron, called for greater European defence independence (Erlanger, 2021). Meanwhile, adversaries like China and Russia used the withdrawal to question U.S. global leadership (Doshi, 2021).

4.3 Domestic Political Consequences

The war's financial and human costs—over \$2 trillion and 2,400 U.S. military deaths—contributed to declining domestic support for interventionism (Watson Institute, 2021). Future U.S. foreign policy is likely to be shaped by greater political scrutiny over military engagements.

4.4 Evolution of U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy

Despite withdrawal, counterterrorism remains a key priority. The U.S. continues drone strikes and intelligence operations in Afghanistan to monitor threats from al-Qaeda and ISIS-K (Clarke, 2022).

4.5 Strategic Reorientation Toward Great-Power Competition

The U.S. has redirected focus toward countering China's rise and Russia's aggression, emphasizing Indo-Pacific security, cyber warfare, and strategic deterrence (National Security Strategy, 2022). Afghanistan's withdrawal reflects a broader shift from counterinsurgency to great-power competition.

5. Conclusion

The Afghanistan experience underscores the limitations of prolonged military intervention and state-building. While initial objectives—eliminating al-Qaeda bases—were met, long-term goals of stabilizing Afghanistan proved unsustainable. The withdrawal has reshaped U.S. foreign policy, favouring diplomacy, counterterrorism from a distance, and strategic deterrence over direct military occupations. As the U.S. navigates a changing geopolitical landscape, the lessons of Afghanistan will continue to influence strategic decision-making, alliance management, and military engagements in the years ahead.

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