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Deconstructing the Collapse of Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces

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ABSTRACT: The rapid collapse of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) in August 2021 was widely anticipated and due to its structural constraints and qualitative decline from 2018–21. This article provides a targeted analysis of ANDSF operational liabilities and qualitative limitations, referencing often overlooked statements by US and Afghan political and military officials, data from official US government reports, and prescient NGO field analyses. The painful ANDSF experience illuminates several principles that must be considered as US policymakers turn toward security force assistance for proxy and surrogate military forces in conflict with the partners of America’s emerging great-power geostrategic competitors—China and Russia.

Keywords: Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), Taliban, Doha Accord, collapse, security force assistance

In the year since the abrupt August 2021 collapse of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and the flight of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) of President Ashraf Ghani, a post-mortem myth has evolved. In the GIROA narrative, the rapid vaporization of the Afghan forces from the fight against the Afghan Taliban was a surprise to the Ghani government, the leadership of the US Embassy in Kabul, and American military leaders.¹ As evidence of this shock, its proponents cite the often-repeated 2021 public assurances by US political masters and military commanders that the Afghan defense and security forces would likely not prevail on their own but forecast that with limited American “over-the-horizon support,” it might continue to put up a credible fight for another 6 to 12 months.²

This mythology does not withstand scrutiny. The swift demise of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces was, in the words of the late US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, a “knowable known.” In fact, it was a “knowable known.”

1. See Jermaine Mohan, “Afghanistan’s Collapse Was Ashraf Ghani’s Fault,” *Chronicle* (website), October 18, 2021, <https://chronicle.durhamcollege.ca/2021/10/afghanistans-collapse-was-ashraf-ghanis-fault/>; and Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, “Afghanistan Collapse Was Not Inevitable,” *Slate* (website), February 2, 2022, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/02/joe-biden-afghanistan-collapse-not-inevitable.html>.

2. See Lara Seligman, “Top General on Afghanistan: ‘I Don’t Think the End Game Is Yet Written,’” *Politico* (website), July 21, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/21/mark-milley-top-general-afghanistan-taliban-500445>; and *Statement of General Mark A. Milley, USA, 20th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Department of Defense Afghanistan Hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/download/milley092821>.

In fact, it actually was a known-known for quite some time before August 2021.³ Since 2018, the ANDSF were never as big as reported nor as cohesive as implied in public statements. Although pessimistic, American military and intelligence leaders hedged their assessments of Afghan military viability after a final US withdrawal, speaking of an inevitable ANDSF demise in terms of months, not weeks. Yet by the end of 2018 ANDSF leaders and servicemembers understood that without a reversal of course in Washington, the American-Taliban peace negotiations would result in the end of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces.⁴

From its inception, the Afghan military was a “monkey in the middle” of the geopolitical dynamics between the United States, the Pakistani military and intelligence services, and the fractious political leadership of Afghanistan. Combined, these factors seriously constrained the ANDSF, assuring it had quantifiable shortcomings and qualitative liabilities it could never resolve without continuing US and Coalition military in-country support. These quantitative shortfalls included insufficient aerial or artillery support for troops in contact, inadequate aerial resupply and replenishment for forces far afield, and insufficient maintenance to sustain the main weapons systems. Each of these shortfalls had been reported publicly for years. They merely accelerated after 2018.

More critically, the ANDSF had qualitative problems limiting its ability to conduct credible, autonomous counterinsurgency operations against a determined and resilient Taliban. Its cohesion was suspect owing to endemic mistrust of the Afghan central government and systemic corruption in its leadership ranks. Its morale was questionable, as it routinely suffered high-casualty attacks by Taliban forces. Other than in its small number of special operations forces, it lacked the ability to prevent proactively or respond to Taliban attacks without substantive American support. Moreover, from 2018 through 2021, ANDSF bore the brunt of Taliban aggression while US and Western militaries enjoyed first an informal agreement, and later, after the February 2020 US-Taliban Peace Agreement (Doha Accord), a formal arrangement with the Taliban to stop attacking foreign military forces only.

The February 2020 US-Taliban Doha Accord framed one final important dilemma for the ANDSF. The agreement stipulated all US and Western troops must

3. See Craig Whitlock, “The Afghanistan Papers – At War with the Truth,” *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>; Paul D. Shinkman, “Top U.S. General: Afghan Army Could Not Survive on Its Own,” *U.S. News & World Report*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2021-03-25/top-us-general-afghan-army-could-not-survive-on-its-own>; and Anatol Lieven, “Why Afghan Forces so Quickly Laid Down Their Arms,” *Politico* (website), August 16, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/08/16/afghanistan-history-taliban-collapse-504977>.

4. Douglas London, “CIA’s Former Counterterrorism Chief for the Region: Afghanistan, Not an Intelligence Failure – Something Much Worse,” *Just Security* (website), August 18, 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/77801/cias-former-counterterrorism-chief-for-the-region-afghanistan-not-an-intelligence-failure-something-much-worse/>.

depart Afghanistan by May 1, 2021, or, and as the Taliban made clear repetitively, they would renew attacks against United States Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A) and other foreign forces as “fair game.” This deadline gave the US military and Coalition forces enormous incentives to move out of Afghanistan rapidly to reduce “risks to the force.” But this accelerated American military retrograde undercut the negotiating position of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) with the Taliban, and, in turn, gave ANDSF mid-level and junior officers and enlisted servicemembers additional incentives to cut local deals and prepare for an almost-certain Taliban return to power.

These debilitating quantitative and qualitative dynamics were hiding in plain sight—known and publicized in open-source media and public testimony. To establish the record of preconditions and important moments in the ANDSF’s rapid collapse properly, it is important to reexamine the chronology of what was known about ANDSF fragility from 2018 on, especially from 2020–21. A focused review will recount the most important “knowns” about this fragility in three key time periods: (1) January 2018 to February 2020, (2) March 2020 to April 2021, and, (3) May to August 2021.

This review highlights several principles American policymakers should consider in the future; one where Washington may find itself advising or directly supporting proxy and surrogate military forces undertaking kinetic activities against the proxies or forces of America’s great-power competitors. The ANDSF’s failure to launch and spectacular 2021 collapse reflect a larger historic problem for US security assistance efforts at training, advising, and equipping of allied militaries as an alternative to large, semipermanent US ground-force commitments.⁵ American policymakers must acknowledge this disappointing legacy and approach security-partner assistance in the new era of great-power competition with humility, forethought, and caution informed by the heavily foretold, rapid demise of the ANDSF.

Cost Consciousness and Delimited Afghan National Defense and Security Forces

The ANDSF’s growth parameters and composition were adjusted multiple times over its 20-year lifespan.⁶ After fluctuating during the 2000s, by the 2010s,

5. Stephen Biddle, “Building Security Forces & Stabilizing Nations: The Problem of Agency,” *Daedalus* 146, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 126–38, https://direct.mit.edu/daed/article-pdf/146/4/126/1831111/daed_a_00464.pdf; Walter C. Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships and Counterinsurgency* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1–52, 289–313; and Stephen Biddle, “Afghanistan’s Legacy: Emerging Lessons of an Ongoing War,” *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 73–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.926210>.

6. For a short review of sizing machinations, see T. X. Hammes, “Raising and Mentoring Security Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq,” in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, ed., Richard D. Hooker Jr. and Joseph J. Collins (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 281–304.

US and Coalition partners decided ANDSF would be structured at 352,000 total personnel, 195,000 of whom were in the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan Air Force (AAF), with the remainder under the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) as national police and special security forces.⁷ It is unlikely ANDSF ever met these totals as reporting was notoriously suspect and the ability of US and Coalition advisers to monitor them atrophied consistently after 2014 as ANDSF took the counterinsurgency lead and Coalition mentors stepped back from side-by-side advising.⁸ Washington and its partners limited the AAF to a small number of aerial platforms with light, counterinsurgency-focused fixed-wing and ground-strike helicopters and a limited number of lift aircraft for reliable countrywide mobility for an ANA of almost 200,000 (see table 1). Likewise, the Afghan army would have limited indirect-fire weapons capability and be structured without long-range artillery or drone-strike assets.

The ANA was built to rely on US and Coalition support for its main battlefield competitive advantages against the Taliban insurgency: generation of airspace superiority, long-haul aerial logistics and mobility, and volume in air-to-ground interdiction strikes.

7. Department of Defense (DoD), *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, December 2017), 35–36, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/1225-Report-Dec-2017.pdf>.

8. “Transcripts: Department of Defense Press Briefing by Gen. Campbell via Satellite in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” DoD (website), October 2, 2014; and SIGAR, “Oversight Bubble Inquiry Letter,” SIGAR 14-4-SP, October 10, 2013.

Table 1. March 2020 Authorized and Available Aircraft for Afghanistan Air Force

(Entries with an asterisk are very light, small aircraft that would prove no match for the standard aircraft found in the Pakistani air force. These aircraft dominated the composition of the Afghanistan Air Force.)

Military Function	Aircraft Name	# Authorized	# Available
Air-to-Air Fixed Wing Fighters		0	0
Air-to-Ground Strike and Reconnaissance/ Strike Category Totals		105	89
Fixed Wing	A29 (Super Toucan)*	25	15
	AC-208*	10	10
Rotary Wing	MD-530*	48	45
	Mi-17	22	19
Aerial Transport/ Lift Category Totals		72	65
Fixed Wing	C-208*	23	23
	C-130	4	2
Rotary Wing	UH-60	45	40

These military hardware parameter limitations and force number vacillations emerged because of American and partner-state concerns about the costs and sustainment potential for an autonomous Afghan security force. A bigger AAF or a more capable ground force would cost more to recruit, train, retain, and operate with higher-end technologies.⁹ Thus, the United States preferred utilizing its own in-country military assets for these higher-end capabilities, thereby capping the costs to US taxpayers at about \$4 billion.¹⁰

Another critical regional security dynamic helped scope these ANDSF limitations: Pakistan's wary military and intelligence organizations. Pakistan never wanted strong, capable, autonomous ANDSF for several strategic reasons. First, Pakistan fundamentally distrusted the non-Pashtun ethnic groups in the north and west of Afghanistan, particularly the Tajiks and the Uzbeks. Pakistani security leaders viewed them as hostile to Pakistan and pointed to recent history for

9. Department of Defense (DoD), *Report on Progress toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Report to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, October 2013, 48, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/October_1230_Report_Master_Nov7.pdf).

10. See Kenneth Katzman, *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report RL30588 (Washington, DC: CRS, December 13, 2017), 27–28, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL30588/278>.

justification.¹¹ During the Afghan civil war of the 1990s, these Tajik and Uzbek groups not only battled against Pashtun groups favored by the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence Agency, but often took funding and physical support from Russia, Iran and, most critically, India. In 1994, Pakistan supported the Afghan Taliban in opposing these groups and was alarmed when post-2001 Afghan governments routinely featured Tajik and Uzbek strongmen as leaders of the ANDSF and the Afghan national intelligence services.¹²

Second, Pakistan feared Indian subterfuge and access to Pakistan's "back door" in the post-2001 Afghan government and especially in the ANDSF.¹³ India is Pakistan's biggest security concern and is described in Pakistan as an existential threat. Pakistan's chilly relations with the Tajik and Uzbek groups who habitually led the ANDSF (and Afghan intelligence service, the National Directorate of Security) made them paranoid that the ANDSF and National Directorate of Security would abet Indian diplomatic and intelligence assets at or near the Pakistani border.¹⁴ These fears underpinned Pakistan's constant complaining from 2004–15 that Afghanistan was riven with over a dozen Indian consulates, many close to Pakistan, and threatening to destabilize Pakistan through various means of cross-border influence. In reality, there never were more than five of these Indian outposts, including the Indian embassy in Kabul.¹⁵ Informed by these concerns, Pakistan's security establishment continued its indirect support for the Afghan Taliban, preferring a low-boil instability inside Afghanistan to a strong, non-Pashtun, ANDSF doing India's bidding and putting a "security squeeze" on Pakistan from the west.¹⁶

Concurrently, Pakistan quietly preferred the US military remain affiliated with the Afghan military while the Taliban was weak for three main reasons: because Rawalpindi officials distrusted the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as a stalking horse for India; because American presence there anchored a counterterrorism partnership that reaped a large financial-aid package for the Pakistani military; and because American military commanders served as a kind of

11. Raja Karthikeya Gundu and Teresita C. Schaffer, "India and Pakistan in Afghanistan: Hostile Sports," *South Asia Monitor* 117 (April 3, 2008), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-asia-monitor-india-and-pakistan-afghanistan-hostile-sports-april-03-2008>.

12. Rizwan Hussein, *Pakistan and the Emergence of Islamic Militancy in Afghanistan* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2005), 55–62; and Nasreen Akhtar, "Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Taliban," *International Journal on World Peace* 25, no. 4 (December 2008): 49–73, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20752859?seq=19#metadata_info_tab_contents.

13. Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk, *India's and Pakistan's Strategies in Afghanistan: Implications for the United States and the Region*, RAND Occasional Paper 387 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), 1–3, 25–36, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP387.pdf; and Gundu and Schaffer, "India and Pakistan in Afghanistan."

14. Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (Oxford, UK: Pan Books, 2000), 17–35.

15. Steve Coll, *Directorate S: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 267–70.

16. Seth G. Jones, "Afghanistan's Future Emirate? The Taliban and the Struggle for Afghanistan," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 11 (West Point, New York: Countering Terrorism Center, November 2020), <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CTC-SENTINEL-112020.pdf>; and Hanauer and Chalk, *Strategies in Afghanistan*.

big-brother overseer and a node for the Pakistani military (PakMIL) and its Inter-Services Intelligence Agency to push back against ANDSF activities or associations (especially with India) that Islamabad found threatening. To be certain, American military presence in Afghanistan was bothersome for Pakistan in many other ways, but Rawalpindi balanced these with the benefits a US footprint there provided.¹⁷

Thus, the AAF would have a limited quantity and quality of air-to-ground strike aircraft. The AAF would have a limited number of airlifter planes with a capacity limited to battling insurgent forces rather than a cross-border rival state. The ANDSF had a limited number of ground artillery assets, and those were constrained in firing range—again, so they would not be able to range far into Pakistani territory in the event of major cross-border insurgency hostilities. The United States would provide all these capabilities and more.¹⁸

From birth, ANDSF was a “monkey in the middle” caught between US/Coalition concerns about affordability and sustainability and Pakistani worries about a strong force on its border with autonomous security aims and suspect relations with India.

Mixed Loyalty

ANDSF uniformed and civilian leadership was normally ethnic Tajiks or Uzbeks, and it struggled to recruit Pashtuns throughout the 2000s but attained proportionality in the 2010s.¹⁹ While desirable, Pashtun proportionality in the Afghan armed forces represented both a strength and a weakness. Pashtun representation was important optically and politically for a Pashtun-led government. Pashtun proportionality in the middle-to-lower ANDSF ranks enabled the government to present its forces as representative of the nation. Additionally, proportional ethnic representation ensured the Pashtun-led national government met the expectations of its political

17. See Moeed Yusuf, Huma Yusuf and Salman Zaidi, *Pakistan, the United States and the End Game in Afghanistan: Perceptions of Pakistan's Foreign Policy Elite* (Islamabad: Jinnah Institute - R0811-04, 2011), 14–15, 21–28, 28; John Schmidt, *The Unraveling: Pakistan in the Age of Jihad* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 198–202; and Jibrán Ahmad, “Afghan Taliban Stop Pakistan Army from Fencing International Border,” Reuters (website), December 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-taliban-stop-pakistan-army-fencing-international-border-2021-12-22/>.

18. See SIGAR, *High-Risk List* (Arlington, VA: SIGAR, December 2014), 1, www.sigar.mil/pdf/spotlight/High-Risk_List.pdf.

19. DoD, *Report on Progress*, 38; and Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Afghan National Security Forces: Afghan Corruption and the Development of an Effective Fighting Force,” Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee’s Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, Brookings (website), August 2, 2012, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/afghan-national-security-forces-afghan-corruption-and-the-development-of-an-effective-fighting-force/>.

base. Given that the Afghan Taliban was mainly a Pashtun insurgency, equal ethnic representation was a political and military necessity.

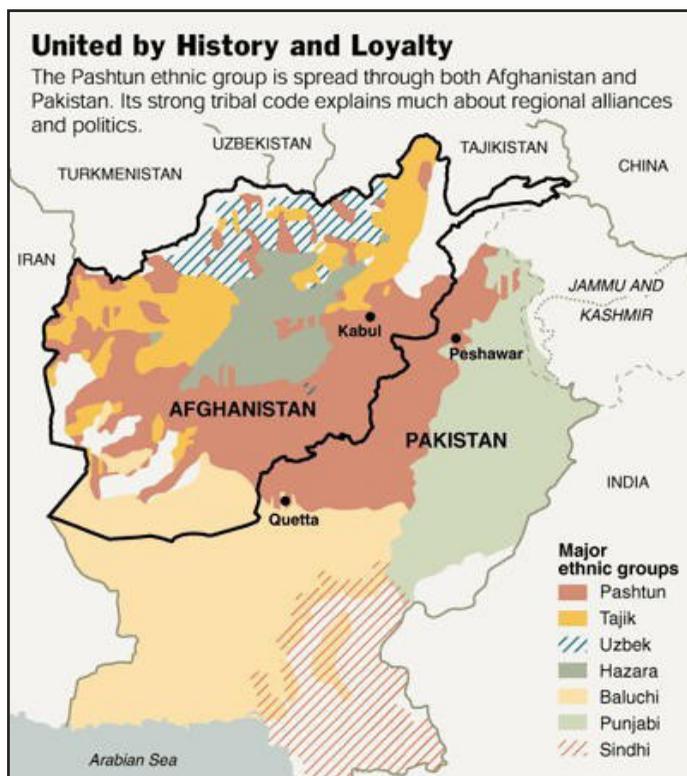


Figure 2. Major ethnic groups of Afghanistan

(Map courtesy of <https://www.worldfuturefund.org/wffmaster/Reading/Maps/afghan.map.htm>)

Pashtun representation in the Afghan military also generated weakness. Unlike the northern Afghan ethnic groups, Pashtun tribes and subtribes span the soft, highly porous border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. There are approximately 14 million Pashtuns in Afghanistan, and they make up 42 percent of its population. As no other Afghan ethnicity comprises more than 27 percent of the population, Pashtuns hold the political power to assure national leadership. There are another 30 million ethnic Pashtuns in Pakistan. They are 16 percent of the Pakistani population but make up 66 percent of all regional Pashtuns. Therefore, Pashtun tribes and families in Afghanistan must always consider cross-border political and security issues. Since the Afghan Taliban is comprised of ethnic Pashtun subtribes and subgroups, Afghan Pashtuns hedged their bets in the post-2001 era. True across Afghanistan but especially in the Pashtun-dominated east and southeast, kinship and tribal connections often take precedence over

formal political loyalties.²⁰ Thus, it was common for Afghan Pashtun families to have one son in the Afghan military and another in the Taliban.²¹ One son made the family money with a regular government paycheck, and the other assured the family with a hedge against insurgent success.

By 2015, serious Afghan observers knew Pashtun families were negotiating with the Taliban in anticipation of ANDSF's ultimate failure. Early that year, the United States and NATO ended their leadership of the counterinsurgency combat mission in Afghanistan and shifted to training assistance, advising the ANDSF at-distance. Soon afterward, al-Qaeda training sites appeared in southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban had begun to push back the ANDSF in 2015. Alarmed, the Obama administration arrested its withdrawal plans and took steps to allow US and NATO forces to support the ANDSF.²² Then, the Trump administration review of Afghan policy authorized a mid-2017 mini-surge of US forces in yet another American effort to show strength against the resurgent Afghan Taliban. The Trump surge featured additional US military advisers in new Security Force Assistance Brigades for placement into ANDSF lower echelons and were considered critical to the campaign's success.²³ Arriving in early 2018, they conducted advising missions, facilitated operation planning with selected ANA Brigades and even some Kandaks (battalions) fighting the Taliban for the first time since 2014.

Taliban Violence Reduction against the United States, Not Afghan National Defense and Security Forces June 2018 to February 2020

The Trump surge and renewed connectivity between US/NATO military units and tactical ANDSF formations was short-lived. By summer 2018, the Trump administration announced it was pursuing direct peace negotiations with the Afghan Taliban, formally appointing Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as a Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation (SRAR) by the fall. SRAR Khalilzad acquired presidential authority to negotiate directly with Taliban representatives, mainly in Doha, Qatar, while keeping the Afghan government informed but not formally represented. From this point, the

20. Anatol Lieven, "An Afghan Tragedy: The Pashtuns, the Taliban and the State," *Survival* 63, no. 3 (June–July 2021): 7–31, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/survival/2021/survival-global-politics-and-strategy-june-july-2021>; and Lieven, "Why Afghan Forces."

21. General Abdul Fahim Wardak, then-Afghan Minister of Defense, comment to author (Kabul, Afghanistan, December 2009).

22. Thomas F. Lynch III, "After ISIS: Reappraising U.S. Policy in Afghanistan," *Washington Quarterly*, 38, no. 2 (July 2015): 119–44.

23. Ryan Browne and Barbara Starr, "US Military Says It Killed Dozens of Taliban Leaders in Afghanistan," *CNN* (website), May 30, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/30/politics/us-killed-taliban-leaders-afghanistan/index.html>.

Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan felt it was being sidelined and its future negotiated in absentia.

Sensing the prospect for a favorable outcome, or at least a respite from an exceptionally violent period of the insurgency, Afghan Taliban targeting of US/western military forces tailed off notably.²⁴ Fifteen American and allied forces were killed in Afghanistan in 2017, with eight of those deaths linked to attacks by the Afghan Taliban. In 2018, there were 14 US/allied troop deaths, and none were claimed by the Taliban. The pattern continued with almost all US 2019–20 military deaths coming from counterterrorism operations initiated by the US and Afghan forces against groups affiliated with al-Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban in Afghanistan, or the Islamic State in Khorasan (ISIS-K).²⁵ Over the same period, ANDSF deaths from Taliban attacks and battles soared, moving beyond 8,000 per year in 2017–18 and up to an estimated 10,900 per year in 2019 and 2020.²⁶ Afghan President Ashraf Ghani reported in early 2019 that more than 45,000 members of the ANDSF had been killed since he became leader in 2014.²⁷

The ANDSF quandary came into full relief as formal US-Taliban peace talks commenced in January 2019.²⁸ The ANDSF bore the brunt of the Taliban fight on the ground without sufficient critical military capabilities to counter Taliban strength, and it now had the full knowledge that the Taliban appeared to have limited attacks against the American and Western military forces informally to encourage talks designed

24. Jonathan Beale, “Why Are UK and US Sending More Troops to Afghanistan?” *BBC News* (website), August 13, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44967531>.

25. Compiled from “Number of Fatalities among Western Coalition Soldiers Involved in the Execution of Operation Enduring Freedom from 2001 to 2021,” Statista (website), <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262894/western-coalition-soldiers-killed-in-afghanistan/>; Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Afghanistan,” Department of State (website), n.d., <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/afghanistan/>; Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Afghanistan,” Department of State (website), n.d., <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/afghanistan/>; DoD, *Stability and Security in Afghanistan*, Reports to Congress (Washington, DC: DoD, December 2017, December 2018, December 2019, December 2020, and December 2021); and Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *January 20, 2017 Quarterly Report to US Congress, January 20, 2018 Quarterly Report to US Congress, January 20, 2019 Quarterly Report to US Congress, January 20, 2020 Quarterly Report to US Congress, and January 20, 2021 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., <https://www.sigar.mil/quarterlyreports/>.

26. Sam Gollob and Michael E. O’Hanlon, *Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-9/11 Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Foreign Policy at Brookings, 2020), 17, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/FP_20200825_afghanistan_index.pdf.

27. “Afghanistan’s Ghani Says 45,000 Security Personnel Killed Since 2014,” *BBC News* (website), January 25, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47005558>.

28. Steve Coll and Adam Entous, “The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan,” *New Yorker* (website), December 10, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/12/20/the-secret-history-of-the-us-diplomatic-failure-in-afghanistan>.

to end Western military presence. This knowledge exacerbated ANDSF anxieties and reinforced local-level hedging behavior.

The Doha Accord and Extreme ANDSF Exposure March 2020 to April 2021

On February 29, 2020, SRAR Khalilzad and Afghan Taliban representative Abdul Ghani Baradar signed the US-Taliban Peace Accord in Doha, Qatar. The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was not a signatory and had played no direct role in its negotiation over the prior 16 months. The agreement committed the United States and Coalition partners to “complete” military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 15 months—by May 1, 2021. In return, the Taliban promised three major outcomes. First, it committed to preventing al-Qaeda or similar international Salafi jihadist terror organizations from planning or conducting attacks against the United States or its allies from Afghan soil. It made a formal promise to refrain from attacks against US and Coalition forces during the implementation period and committed to a reduction in violence (RIV) for Afghanistan as a whole. The Taliban, however, did not formally promise to refrain from attacking GIRoA or ANDSF targets.²⁹ It also agreed to commence political talks with the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan aimed at reconciliation and a new framework for Afghan governance—inter-Afghan negotiations (IAN).³⁰

Absent a total collapse of the peace agreement, the best outcome for the ANDSF would be one where inter-Afghan negotiations were successful, and there would be some combination of ANDSF and Taliban military assets. Ultimately, this outcome would require a process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR). Historically, the pathway to DDR between government and insurgent forces is vexing. While there are incentives for opposing military forces to reduce violence and save combatant lives, there are also competing incentives for them to maximize political negotiating leverage by conducting aggressive military operations aimed at altering “facts on the ground.” Often, a cease-fire agreement is built into a political negotiating period to dampen the incentives for military aggression.³¹ When a viable cease-fire is not feasible or enforceable, the

29. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

30. “Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,” February 29, 2020, 1, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf>. (The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban.); and Michael R. Pompeo, “Secretary Pompeo Remarks to Media,” US Department of State (website), February 25, 2020, video, 18:35, site-894736.bcvp0rtal.com/detail/videos/secretary-of-state/video/6135770177001/secretary-pompeo-remarks-to-media.?autoStart=true.

31. Valerie Sticher and Siniša Vuković, “Bargaining in Intrastate Conflicts: The Shifting Role of Ceasefires,” *Journal of Peace Research* 1, no. 1 (May 2021): <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022343320982658>; Coll and Entous, “Secret History”; and SIGAR, *April 30, 2020 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., <https://www.sigar.mil/quarterlyreports/>.

force with the upper hand will normally fight to secure gains that will enhance its negotiating leverage. Since the terms of the Doha Accord allowed the Taliban to continue fighting against the ANDSF and GIRoA throughout the IAN period, they continued to press their martial advantage.

The worst scenario for ANDSF was one where the United States stuck to its withdrawal plans, IAN was not successful, and the Taliban took advantage of US/Coalition withdrawal of forces to attrit the ANDSF badly. Details of the reduction in violence (RIV) component in the US-Taliban Peace Accord were relegated to a classified annex but appeared to inhibit, but not credibly prohibit, the Taliban from pursuing this course of action.

After the February Doha Agreement signing ceremony, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo stated the level of Taliban attacks and violence were expected to remain low.³² But by late April 2020, General Austin “Scott” Miller, US Forces Afghanistan and Operation Resolute Support commander, reported that from March 1 to 31, “the Taliban refrained from attacks against Coalition Forces, [while] they increased attacks against ANDSF to levels above seasonal norms.”³³

Taliban military activities during spring and summer 2020 were unambiguously aggressive, but in a differentiated manner. An independent fall 2020 assessment reported Taliban-controlled areas experienced unexpected peace in the aftermath of Doha as the United States largely halted air attacks and the ANDSF moved to a defensive posture. But in GIRoA-controlled areas, the Taliban intensified violence against government entities and Afghan civilians even as it limited major attacks.³⁴

A key part of the Doha Accord not made public called on US forces to end offensive air strikes against the Taliban while allowing for strikes in defense of the ANDSF.³⁵ After a post-Doha Agreement lull, American military air strikes to protect ANDSF resumed in summer 2020. The Taliban formally protested all American strikes that supported ANDSF, calling them a violation of the Doha

32. Michael R. Pompeo, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo at a Press Availability after the Afghanistan Signing Ceremony: Remarks to the Press,” Department of State (website), February 29, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/at-a-press-availability-after-the-afghanistan-signing-ceremony/index.html>.

33. SIGAR, *April 30, 2020 Quarterly Report*, 62, 65.

34. Andrew Quilty, “Taliban Opportunism and ANSF Frustration: How the Afghan Conflict Has Changed Since the Doha Agreement,” Afghan Analysts Network (website), October 12, 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/taliban-opportunism-and-ansf-frustration-how-the-afghan-conflict-has-changed-since-the-doha-agreement/>.

35. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

Accord's annex on managing combat. Later in 2020, the Taliban used US air activity to justify their intensifying military campaign against Kabul.³⁶

The prisoner exchange component of the Doha Accord partially enabled surging Taliban military activity and acumen. Despite GIRoA skepticism, the final Doha Accord called for the confidence-building exchange of “up to” 5,000 Taliban prisoners held in Afghan jails in exchange for 1,000 Afghans held by the Taliban. The Taliban quickly insisted release of a full 5,000 was a precondition to commencing peace talks with the GIRoA.³⁷ Under American pressure, Afghan leaders released about 4,600 Taliban prisoners in spring 2020 and the final 400 in August 2020 after a period of inter-Afghan, and Afghan-American debate. An independent research report in late summer 2020 estimated almost 70 percent of the 108 released Taliban resumed active fighting roles, returning important battlefield expertise to intensifying Taliban military operations.³⁸

ANDSF morale took a direct hit from the way Taliban leaders spoke and acted after the Doha Accord. Tolo News reported that on March 25 in Balochistan Province, Pakistan, a senior Taliban negotiator, Mullah Fazel, told supporters the Taliban would ultimately be victorious in establishing an Islamic Emirate. Fazel reportedly said that while the “Taliban or the Islamic Emirate will never become part of the Kabul [Afghan] government,” the Taliban might accept Afghan government officials with senior positions.³⁹ US Agency for International Development (USAID)–funded monitoring of Taliban public communications found the Taliban's tone resoundingly triumphant during April and May 2020 following the announced withdrawal of US military forces, clearly indicating to Afghan forces the future government of Afghanistan would be subject to Taliban preferences and potential vengeance.⁴⁰ The one-sided pattern of Taliban aggression persisted into mid-October 2020 when USFOR-A Commander General Miller again stated that the high

36. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

37. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

38. Lynne O'Donnell, “Defying Peace Deal, Freed Taliban Return to Battlefield,” *Foreign Policy* (website), September 3, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/03/defying-peace-deal-freed-taliban-prisoners-return-battlefield-afghanistan/>; France 24, “Some Freed Taliban Prisoners Have Returned to Battle, Says Afghan Negotiator,” *France24.com* (website), September 23, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200923-afghanistan-freed-taliban-prisoners-return-battle-abdullah-abdullah-doha-peace-talks>.

39. Abubakar Siddique, “Are the Taliban Committed to Negotiating Peace in Afghanistan?” *Gandhara* (website), March 31, 2020, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/are-the-taliban-committed-to-negotiating-peace-in-afghanistan-/30520521.html>.

40. Quilty, “Taliban Opportunism and ANSF Frustration.”

level of Taliban violence around the country “is not consistent with the US-Taliban agreement and undermines the ongoing Afghan peace talks.”⁴¹

The disposition and orientation of ANDSF forces contributed to its vulnerability in the post-Doha Accord fight. In November 2019, the Afghan government estimated that the ANDSF had over 10,000 checkpoints nationwide, with an average of 10 to 20 personnel at each. After the Doha Accord, as Coalition forces stepped back from advising and assisting ANA forward elements, they helped the ANA with a checkpoint reduction and base development plan (CPRBD) for 2021 that reportedly reduced ANA checkpoints to just under 2,000 with another 600 patrol bases across Afghanistan.⁴² It still meant the ANDSF had approximately one-third of its total force, 95,000 personnel, manning checkpoints as of December 2020.⁴³

Afghan National Defense and Security Forces checkpoint-heavy positioning contributed to a largely static and defensive mission profile even as GIROA political leadership belatedly called for greater assertiveness against the resurgent Taliban in 2020. Most ANA Corps reportedly refused to execute missions without ANA Special Operations Command (ANASOC) augmentation. When ANASOC Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) arrived, they were just as likely to be misused to perform tasks intended for conventional forces such as route clearance, checkpoint security, and quick-reaction force.⁴⁴ From October to December 2020, the ASSF took on more responsibility for ground operations, and conducting more operations in a single quarter than they had since April–June 2019.⁴⁵ Small and overtaxed, the ASSF could not meet rapidly growing demand.⁴⁶

As the Biden-Harris administration assumed control and began a comprehensive review of Afghanistan policy in early 2021, the worst-case scenario for ANDSF unfolded. The Taliban stepped up attacks, maintained close ties with al-Qaeda, and actively planned for large-scale offensives—all while IAN between GIROA and the Taliban failed to make any progress.⁴⁷ The April 9, 2021, *Annual Threat Assessment of the*

41. USFOR-A Spokesman Colonel Sonny Leggett, “Taliban Need to Step Up,” October 12, 2020, https://twitter.com/USFOR_A/status/1315602850186244096.

42. SIGAR, *April 30, 2022 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., 71-2, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2022-04-30qr.pdf>.

43. SIGAR, *January 30, 2021 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., 1, 68, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-01-30qr.pdf>.

44. SIGAR, *April 30, 2021 Quarterly Report to US Congress*, SIGAR (website), n.d., 75, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2021-04-30qr.pdf>.

45. See SIGAR, *January 30, 2021 Quarterly Report*, 63; and ASSF - Afghan Special Security Forces, ANA Special Operations Command (ANASOC), <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/afghanistan/anasoc.htm>.

46. Also see SIGAR, *January 30, 2021 Quarterly Report*, 47.

47. Defense Department’s Office of Inspector General, May 18, 2021; and Courtney Kube and Dan De Luce, “Taliban Ramped Up Attacks against Afghans as Peace Talks Faltered, Pentagon Watchdog Says,” *NBC News* (website), March 2, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/taliban-ramped-attacks-against-afghans-peace-talks-faltered-pentagon-watchdog-n1267852>.

US Intelligence Community stated that prospects for an agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban “will remain low during the next year,” and “the Taliban is likely to make gains on the battlefield, and the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the Coalition withdraws support.” The assessment also concluded that the ANDSF “continues to face setbacks on the battlefield, and the Taliban is confident it can achieve military victory.”⁴⁸

Independent reporting indicates USFOR-A Commander Miller strongly argued during the Biden-Harris administration comprehensive review that the United States must keep forces in Afghanistan beyond the May 1, 2021, deadline for fear of what would happen to the Afghan military once the United States departed.⁴⁹ General Miller wrote what he had earlier stated in public: the level of Taliban military operational tempo could not be countered by the Afghan military alone.

Full US Military Withdrawal and ANDSF Collapse May to August 2021

On April 14, 2021, Biden announced the United States would end its military presence in Afghanistan by September 11, 2021.⁵⁰ American diplomats began pressing for expedited IAN, even as the US military and allied NATO forces pivoted to an accelerated withdrawal.⁵¹ In response, Afghan President Ghani tweeted an aspirational message about the ANDSF, stating “Afghanistan’s proud security and defense forces are fully capable of defending its people and country.”⁵² Ghani seemed to hold out hope and made changes to leadership of the Afghan MOD and MOI in March 2021 that bolstered Pashtun status and loyalty to him. At his request, the United States and its European allies avoided evacuating their personnel or Afghan associates for fear it would look like a rush to the exits and precipitate a collapse of GIRoA.⁵³

Yet, as the final US military withdrawal began in May 2021, Ghani was mired in a political crisis that bode poorly for an already bedraggled ANDSF.

48. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), *Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: ODNI, April 9, 2021), 25, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

49. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

50. “Briefing Room: Remarks by Joe Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan” White House (website), April 14, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>.

51. Associated Press, “Afghan Cease-fire Ends after Wave of Violence amid Calls for Fresh Peace Talks,” *NBC News* (website), May 16, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/afghan-cease-fire-ends-amid-calls-fresh-peace%7C-talks-n1267517>; and George Packer, “The Betrayal,” *Atlantic* (website), January 31, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/03/biden-afghanistan-exit-american-allies-abandoned/621307/>.

52. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

53. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

Ghani and his small inner circle, led by National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib, had not fully acted on the late 2020 US military recommendation to consolidate ANDSF forces into a smaller array of more defensible positions focused on strategic elements such as key roads, cities, and border crossings. In truth, the politics and demographics of Afghanistan made it impossible for Ghani to comply fully. Ghani reportedly told US Secretary of State Antony Blinken this sort of repositioning would make GIROA look weak.⁵⁴ Mohib reportedly stated, “We’re not giving up one inch of our country.”⁵⁵

The Taliban already had *de facto* control of much of Afghanistan by then, but Ghani and Mohib knew that to consolidate any further—away from ethnic Pashtun areas and into ones more populated by ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras—was political suicide. Under such a consolidation, he and any future national Pashtun political leader would play third fiddle to a Taliban-dominated Pashtun political base and to Tajik Co-president Abdullah Abdullah or another northern ethnic political persona. SRAR Khalilzad later told American journalists Steve Coll and Adam Entous that Ghani never had any interest in negotiating with the Taliban, for only the status quo kept him in power.⁵⁶ While far from exculpatory of SRAR Khalilzad’s pivotal role in empowering the Taliban military success during peace negotiations, Khalilzad properly understood Ghani’s political calculus.

Poorly positioned, insufficiently equipped, and politically isolated, ANDSF morale was at a tipping point. Then, on July 2, 2021, the abrupt US military departure from Bagram hit the ANDSF hard. Many in the ANDSF reported to local and national news they felt abandoned to die trying to defend Bagram and other such locations.⁵⁷

Regrettably, Biden went on record in early July 2021 stating that a Taliban military takeover or collapse of GIROA was not inevitable.⁵⁸ This statement misappreciated the realities of low ANDSF morale, bad tactical positioning, and a lack of confidence in GIROA. Perhaps the American intelligence community supported Biden’s ANDSF assessment, but such a conclusion would have been based upon its evaluation of the Taliban shortcomings, not on the structural or emotional liabilities of the ANDSF. By then, US military leaders lacked the onsite ability to evaluate

54. Jonathan Schroden “Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan’s Security Forces,” *CTC Sentinel* 14, no. 8 (October 2021): 45–61, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CTC-SENTINEL-082021.pdf>.

55. Schroden “Lessons from Collapse.”

56. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

57. Packer, “Betrayal.”

58. “Briefing Room: Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan,” White House (website), July 8, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan/>.

ANDSF morale and cohesion dynamics reasonably, and US/Western abilities to make such assessments accurately had been suspect for a long time.⁵⁹

A lengthy *Washington Post* exposé later confirmed that by spring 2021, Afghan forces were negotiating with the Taliban, often with the help of local elders rather than fighting.⁶⁰ Dealmaking featured arrangements for ANDSF surrender, parole, and temporary local truces, all of which were well-established Afghan conflict resolution practices, alongside those of revenge killings and summary executions. Newly appointed Afghan Minister of Defense Bismillah Khan reported in mid-July what outside accounts like those from the Afghan Advisor Network (AAN) had foretold: the Taliban were offering ANDSF members money and a letter of passage to protect them from harassment after they surrendered. By August 2021, “money was changing hands at a rapid rate,” a senior British military officer said, with Afghan security forces getting “bought off by the Taliban.”⁶¹

Implications

The US-Taliban Peace Accord of February 29, 2020, put a 15-month “clock” on what the ANDSF could expect from US or allied support. It did not generate the perverse incentives underpinning the rapid collapse of the ANDSF, but it accelerated negative expectations that the Taliban would ultimately prevail. From February 2020 until its collapse, ANDSF leadership was told to anticipate an Afghan political settlement and subsequent security forces integration without ever witnessing a viable IAN process. An AAN postmortem summary critiqued this period of political negotiations scathingly, observing that SRAR Khalilzad’s faulty assumption that the Taliban were truly pursuing negotiated peace spawned fantasy scenarios of Taliban-GIRoA cooperation that never aligned with realities on the ground.⁶²

Concurrently, ANDSF leaders and troopers could only reason the US military would draw down to a point where it would stand alone against a resurgent Taliban. An October 2020 AAN report cogently observed that in eight short months since the Doha Agreement, US concessions to coax the Taliban to the negotiating table sharpened its military edge and heightened its confidence while simultaneously deflating and disempowering the ANDSF. The ANDSF bore the

59. Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General's Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 391; and Ben Connable, *Embracing the Fog of War: Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012).

60. Susannah George, “Afghanistan’s Military Collapse: Illicit Deals and Mass Desertions,” *Washington Post* (website), August 15, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/15/afghanistan-military-collapse-taliban/>.

61. Coll and Entous, “Secret History.”

62. Kate Clark, “The Taleban’s Rise to Power: As the US Prepared for Peace, the Taleban Prepared for War,” Afghanistan Analysts Network (website), August 21, 2021, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/the-talebans-rise-to-power-as-the-us-prepared-for-peace-the-taleban-prepared-for-war/>.

brunt of the Taliban's growing eagerness to fight all the while knowing it could not shoulder the accelerating fight alone."⁶³

On August 16, Biden addressed the nation and acknowledged the regrettable outcome of America's exit from Afghanistan, asserting that GIROA and ANDSF collapsed more quickly than anticipated. He also recited the mass of money and equipment the United States had provided ANDSF over the years and called the group it out for collapsing so quickly.⁶⁴

Biden clearly articulated American frustrations with the enormous but unsuccessful effort to build an autonomous Afghan military capability. However, his remarks did not acknowledge that the ANDSF never was designed to defend Afghanistan against a determined, resilient adversary alone or that Afghan culture and tradition set the conditions for a rapid patchwork of local peace deals once it was clear to "the monkey in the middle" that all US military forces would depart and a strong, durable Taliban with tacit Pakistani backing would remain.

As the United States moves forward into a new geostrategic era of great-power competition, it has backed away from counterinsurgency and associated security-sector building and reform that featured in Afghanistan for almost two decades. But American military advising and material support for partner security forces will not vanish in this new era, instead it will morph. The United States assuredly will find itself working with partner militaries, surrogates, and even proxy forces requiring structural and operational support.⁶⁵ Although security-sector reform for a counterinsurgency environment is not the same as advising and supporting a proxy force or surrogate military, a couple of insights from the American experience with ANDSF seem germane.⁶⁶

First, US policymakers should fully study and tailor mission support and package profiles to a realistic set of security goals and outcomes appropriate to both the conflict and the limitations on US military presence. Surrogates or proxy forces aligned against adversaries with sustained backing from an American rival state are not good candidates for structures or operations modeled after US institutions or tactics. Afghanistan, like Vietnam, demonstrates that American-centric approaches are unsustainable without a significant, long-term US military presence. American military advisers and supporting packages must be tailored to understand

63. Kate Clark, "Behind the Statistics: Drop in Civilian Casualties Masks Increased Taleban Violence," Afghanistan Analysts Network (website), October 27, 2020, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/behind-the-statistics-drop-in-civilian-casualties-masks-increased-taleban-violence/>.

64. "Briefing: Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan," White House (website), August 16, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/>.

65. Frank Hoffman and Andrew Orner, "The Return of Great-Power Proxy Wars," War on the Rocks (website), September 2, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/the-return-of-great-power-proxy-wars/>.

66. Ladwig III, *Forgotten Front*, 289–313; Biddle, "Building Security Forces," 126–38; and Biddle, "Afghanistan's Legacy," 73–86.

the cultures and organizations before they deploy and be empowered to shape operational and technological support in a manner that best complements the forces they advise.⁶⁷

Second, security partner fighting force morale must be factored into policy options.⁶⁸ Too often, American military advising reduces its evaluation criteria to counting the quantity of material support and training time. Afghanistan reminds us that the morale of the fighting force is determined by much more than quantitative factors. The culture and incentives of the partner force must be considered. Qualitative metrics based upon local cultural and political needs must be developed and recurrently and fairly assessed. As the loss of fidelity in evaluating ANDSF morale from 2018–21 demonstrates, accurate evaluations are impossible at a distance. US policy must accept the inherent risk necessary to empower military advisers down to the tactical level with partner formations—surrogates or proxies—to generate reasonably reliable evaluations of fighting force morale.

Finally, the advising, training, and operational support for a partner military, proxy, or surrogate force is inherently a principal-agent arrangement.⁶⁹ Principals and agents operate in accordance with their respective political objectives. When these align, the relationship can be productive and enhance mutual security. When these diverge, the relationship can fray and pose a security risk.⁷⁰ Inevitably, even mutually advantageous security relationships tend to expire under the accumulating weight of political interest misalignment. In the case of Afghanistan, that expiration occurred when the United States decided to negotiate peace with the Taliban alone with an aim to terminate American military presence, leaving ANDSF without the structure, sufficient capabilities, or morale to sustain autonomous security operations against a strong and aggressive Taliban adversary. US policymakers must assume that future proxy or surrogate relationships will eventually fray or expire. Thus, the strategic interaction must be informed by a realistic termination criterion and a viable military transition plan.⁷¹

The rapid collapse of Afghan security forces was heavily foretold and largely anticipated. Cognitive dissonance alone explains why this certainty did not better impact American contingency plans for terminating its military presence in

67. Hammes, "Raising and Mentoring Security Forces," 330–31.

68. Schroden, "Lessons from Collapse."

69. Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, "Agency Theory: An Assessment and Review," *Academy of Management Review* 14, no. 1 (1989): 58–59.

70. Biddle, "Building Security Forces," 126–38.

71. Amos C. Fox, *In Pursuit of a General Theory of Proxy War*, Land Warfare Paper 123 (Washington, DC: Institute of Land Warfare/Association of the United States Army, February 2019), 14.

Afghanistan. Future American plans for security forces partnerships can and must do better.

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