

Collin College

DigitalCommons@Collin

Faculty Publications and Presentations

Political Science

2018

USA: Afghanistan Exit Options

Lishan Desta

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.collin.edu/polisci-faculty>



Part of the [International Relations Commons](#)

USA: Afghanistan Exit Options

By

Teddy Lishan Desta, PhD

2018

Abstract

After sixteen years of military and political engagement in Afghanistan, the U.S. is not any closer to its goal of achieving a stable democratic Afghanistan. Efforts to stabilize Afghanistan have been thwarted by the insurgency led by the Taliban, the group the U.S. has toppled sixteen years ago. Today, even U.S. senior generals do not see victory in Afghanistan, but a stalemate.

This paper maintains that what the U.S. basically has in Afghanistan is not a Taliban or a Pakistan problem, but a conceptual error problem. Because of this error, the U.S. is in a vicious cycle that keeps conflating state-building with nation-building and violates the essence of nation-building. The paper presents two major strategies by which the U.S. can correct its error. The dual strategies suggest four ways how the U.S. can exit from Afghanistan, leaving behind a country which is stable and not serving as a haven for terrorist groups.

Introduction

Despite the U.S. and other NATO members' sacrifices so far, Afghanistan is still far from a stable country. The Afghan state is weak and ineffective; and its government is divided and corrupt. Giving up hope on their government and country, every year, thousands of young Afghans leave their country in search of better opportunities in other countries.

It is the insurgency run by the Taliban, which has made Afghanistan chaotic and ungovernable. Today, regularly, suicide bomb attacks rock the capital city, Kabul. The suicide bombs do not only cause widespread carnage, but they also undermine the Afghanistan's government's credibility and ability to keep its own people safe.

It is essential and timely to investigate the reasons why the U.S. has failed to defeat the Taliban-led insurgency after sacrificing 2,500 American servicemen and women and spending approximately \$1 trillion on the war. It is necessary to raise the question anew because, according to U.S. generals and policy experts, the U.S. currently finds itself in a stalemate. The peace talks underway between the U.S. and the Taliban are nowhere close to reaching an agreement to let the U.S. leave Afghanistan with a modicum of victory.

Given the enormity of the cost of the Afghan war and no winning strategy after 18 years of engagement, it will be just the time to ask hard questions about the cause of the stalemate and to discuss potential exit strategies from Afghanistan.

In its analysis of the stalemate, the essay asserts that the main cause of the problem has been lack of conceptual clarity about key policy-related political science-based concepts and the consequent missteps that arises from such an error. As the result, contrary to what the U.S. policymakers expect, the U.S. presence and its activities in Afghanistan are antithetical to the stated policy goals. Therefore, what the U.S. has in Afghanistan is not a Taliban or a Pakistan problem, but a conceptual problem, related to democracy-, state-, and nation-building. And this problem arises because U.S. policymakers either have not properly defined these terms or have not sequenced their actions around the three areas properly. Unless the U.S. recognizes its error in these areas and makes the necessary timely policy corrections, then it will dig itself deeper into a quagmire which be hard to extricate itself from as time passes.

Conceptual Errors

Political theory and practice require that we recognize the difference between nation, state, and democracy, and the associated processes of nation-building, state-building, and democracy-building.

Often, senior American officials describe U.S. engagement in Afghanistan as nation-building and democracy-building. If so, then is the U.S. up to the right mission? If the U.S. doing them the right way? To test the success and failure of the U.S. in Afghanistan, we must first these political categories, namely nation-building, state-building, and democracy-building, is called for in our search for a solution for America's dilemma in Afghanistan.

Nation/ Nationalism: A nation refers to a community of people who share a common origin and history, social and cultural ties, and the aspiration for political sovereignty.¹ For a group of people to reach a stage of nationhood (as defined here) is a protracted process that usually takes centuries to complete. In the modern-age, nationhood culminates when a people establish a sovereignty state. A state is a legally recognized a community of people that possess cohesion among its constituent peoples' groups and with a state free from outside domination and interference.

State/ Sovereignty: The state is quite a concrete concept. A state, in its political definition, possesses two major attributes: a territory with well-defined and internationally recognized borders, and a sovereign government which can exercise effective jurisdiction throughout the state territory. State-building involves establishing effective governmental structures, including the bureaucracy, the army, the police, and the courts. An effective state is one which can keep law and order throughout the territory, protect its national sovereignty from outside interference, and provide efficient public services to all its citizens.

Democracy: Democracy refers to a government that allows citizens, through elections, to determine who gets political power to lead the nation. Democracy, in its liberal form, entails a

¹ See: "Nationalism". <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nationalism/>

government whose powers are limited by a constitution and a state whose citizens are free to exercise political rights and civil liberties.

In the people's estimate, national sovereignty takes precedence over any other political benefit, over any amenity the state can provide or over any freedom democracy can guarantee. The people always want first to secure their nation's sovereignty.

Here is the question: which of the three imperatives (i.e., nationhood, statehood, and democracy) a community of people give priority if all three are at stake? History is our guide. A working state apparatus (i.e., state-building) and a competitive popular democracy (democracy-building) usually wait until the community of people are recognized as a nation.

Hence, there must be a well-planned policy priority in implementing actions related to the three processes. We must respect the inherent hierarchy between the three processes. For example, if the three processes are all still pending, then the first step must involve nation-building, which is to ensure the sovereignty of the people, by freeing them from any outside domination. The second step that follows is state-building, which involves securing territorial integrity and ensuring domestic tranquility and setting up a functional government. Democracy-building is a crowning step in designing governance, involving a political system based on law, competitive elections, and rights.

Quagmire

As events unfold in Afghanistan over the years, it has become increasingly clear that U.S. policymakers have created a virtual quagmire in Afghanistan because they have failed to make the proper conceptual and practical distinctions between nation-, state-, and democracy-building processes. For example, policymakers believe that they are engaged in nation-building while they are not. The U.S. engagement in Afghanistan is at crosscurrents with the notion of nation-building as described here. Since nation-building, in its essence, suggests national sovereignty by getting rid of outside domination and interference, the U.S. in Afghanistan is an act that violates their national autonomy.

Inadvertently, the U.S. continued presence in Afghanistan has given birth to the Taliban insurgency. Today, by the estimates of many Afghans, their weak central government is not the embodiment of their national sovereignty, but a cover for American occupation and domination. Particularly among the Pashtuns, who make the plurality of Afghanistan's ethnic groups, it is the Taliban, instead of the central governments, which is taken as the torchbearer of their nationhood and sovereignty.

Today many recognize that nationalism motivates the Taliban insurgency, of gaining Afghan sovereignty, free from U.S./ NATO presence and even an Afghan government the Taliban believes is a puppet entity. Hence, instead of nation-building, what the U.S. has created is a tough-to-beat resistance movement whose main goal is to recover Afghanistan's full sovereignty by expelling U.S. and NATO forces its territory. As the result, because of the Taliban insurgency, America's other efforts in in the areas of state- and democracy-building have been continually frustrated. Practically, the U.S. has put the cart before the horse.

If history is any guide, it is hard to destroy a nationalist movement. At some point, it is possible that a war-weary American public would tell U.S. policymakers to pull the U.S. forces out of Afghanistan altogether. But any pull out which is hasty can lead to a reversal of much of the gains the U.S. and its allies have achieved so far in Afghanistan. A hasty U.S. withdrawal can lead to a total takeover of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban is no friend of elections, human rights, modern education, and normal foreign relations.

U.S. policymakers responsible for Afghanistan are virtually running out of time. The status quo (in the form of a stalemate) is not sustainable. U.S. policymakers must act quickly and prudently for two main reasons. The more the Afghan war drags on, it can erode the fighting moral of America soldiers. The soldiers would start to notice that they have little to show for their repeated of deployments. They would start to lose confidence in their commanders. Secondly, at some point, tired of the war, the American public may start to clamor for a victory or a withdrawal. If the generals cannot deliver a quick victory or the politicians can achieve a negotiated peace, a war-weary American public can clamor and get a hasty forces pullout from Afghanistan.

It is not likely that the U.S.-Nato forces can score a quick victory against the Taliban. That possibility is becoming increasingly clear to many in the U.S.

To avoid a demoralized U.S. defense forces because of quagmire, or to prevent a precipitative withdrawal from Afghanistan that will wipe out all the gains made so far, then U.S. policymakers must rethink their Afghan strategy thoroughly. Here are a few ways how to do this.

The U.S. on the Bar

What is required among American policymakers now is to realize what they have in Afghanistan is not a Pakistan or a Taliban problem, but a conceptual problem. What they are engaged in the name of nation-building is the antithesis of the goal of nation-building, which is political sovereignty. They must recognize that nation-building cannot be separated from the ideas of national sovereignty and nationalism. They must see that state-building is not fungible with nation-building.

There are some sensible options to U.S. strategy to exit from Afghanistan in a way that meets its basic objectives of leaving behind a country which is stable and responsible in its foreign relations behavior. There are ways by which the future Afghanistan will be a country that can pose little threat to the U.S. or the rest of the world community. A few strategies can help the U.S. to overcome its conceptual error and achieve its goal of ensuring an Afghan. The strategies propose ways in which the U.S. can end the insurgency responsibility and put Afghanistan on a trajectory to a stable and prosperous future.

This Way Out

For the U.S. to achieve its aim in Afghanistan—leaving behind a country that is stable and a government that will not provide a haven for jihadist groups—there are four viable options to explore. The first two options involve ways to moderate the Taliban and reach accommodations with it. The remaining two options suggest ways how the U.S. can cultivate secular nationalistic forces which can work as an alternative to the Taliban, for Afghans to rally around.

i). Calling Riyadh

Taliban's rigid Islamist ideology and policies have their roots in Wahhabism, started and supported by Saudi Arabia. Throughout their career years, the Taliban have much relied on Saudi Arabia for doctrine, finance, and diplomatic recognition. Saudi Arabia has provided an untold amount of support for the Taliban either directly or indirectly through Pakistan. However, today, a wind of change is blowing through Saudi Arabia, and the country is changing in profound ways. Saudi Arabia is turning away from Wahhabism and cutting ties with radical Islamic groups. There lies the U.S. chance to bring about a moderation in the stance of the Taliban at any peace negotiating table.

The U.S. should take advantage of the religious reform in Saudi Arabia and its cozy relationship with the new royals in power. This is a rare window of opportunity that the U.S. can afford to waste.

There are three main reasons why this strategy can work:

First, despite the reforms underway in Saudi Arabia, there is one thing that did not change, even has become worse. This is Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Iran. Seeing the Taliban restored in Afghanistan will give Saudi Arabia a staunch Sunni ally perching on the eastern borders of its arch-rival, Iran. It is likely that it will interest the Saudis in working with the U.S. as both there will be a win-win situation.

Second, because of the ideological changes underway in Saudi Arabia, the Taliban would feel necessary to reform its radical policies not to lose the support its once staunch ally, Saudi Arabia. The Taliban will recognize that it will have challenges to govern Afghanistan without the economic and diplomatic support it gets from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.

Third, Pakistan's support for the Taliban always has a Saudi dimension. In many regards, Pakistan carried out the wishes of Riyadh when it turned its land into a hub of the *mujahideen* indoctrination, training, and transit point. Through a request the U.S. places, the Saudis can put pressure on Pakistan so that Pakistan can force the Taliban to moderate its rigid ideological and policy stances. The Pakistanis have their own economic interest at stake not to antagonize Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. For an agreed U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban returning to power in Kabul, Pakistan can go along the plan to tame the Taliban and other Afghan insurgent groups. Pakistan wants the Taliban back on the saddle in Kabul for its balance-of-power act vis-à-vis its arch-regional rival, India.

If, after negotiations, the Taliban becomes the next Afghanistan government, it will make a moderate government under the oversight of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. As part of the peace deal, the U.S. and others can persuade Taliban to change its policies, for example, on human and political rights. In that way, the Afghanistan the U.S. leaves behind in the hands of the Taliban will be mostly one to its liking.

Riyadh holds the key that can help the U.S. to solve its Taliban and Pakistan problem. But the U.S. must not waste the window of opportunity that has now opened in Riyadh in the form of Mohammed Bin Salman's reforms. The access to Taliban runs through Riyadh and Rawalpindi.

ii). Major Powers to the Rescue

The same outcome of attenuating the Taliban's rigid ideology and policies can be achieved through a second strategy. The U.S. by involving regional powers in a peace conference called out to discuss the situation in Afghanistan, can put pressure on the Taliban to moderate its positions. Involving major countries such as China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, India, and Saudi

Arabia will be necessary as these regional powers have their individual interest to see a stable, prosperous and neighborly Afghanistan emerging once the U.S. forces leave the region.

These powers, despite their ideological differences and geo-political rivalries, in relations to Afghanistan, want to prevent, at any cost, Afghanistan becoming a failed state or a radical Muslim state which serves as a hub for international jihadist groups. At least their objectives in preventing Afghanistan becoming a hub for radical Islamist ideology and activity intersect. It is this selfish interest existing as a common factor among these important nations which the U.S. must recognize and wisely leverage to exit Afghanistan in a way that meets its minimum requirements. If the U.S. negotiates the future of Afghanistan, it will have these major powers on its side if it proposes to hand over power only to a Taliban which is moderate in its ideology and foreign policy orientation.

Any transitional government, led by the Taliban, that takes power in Kabul, as the result of the major powers' conference pressure, will be careful enough to craft its domestic and foreign policies in a way that will never be perceived as a threat by any of these powers. It is natural to expect that the Taliban will be foolhardy to antagonize all these major powers by insisting on a jihadist ideology which nearly all of them consider with alarm. The Taliban-led transitional government will be wise enough to understand that they need powerful foreign friends to succeed. In today's highly inter-connected and inter-dependent world, the Taliban cannot go it alone without at least one of these major regional powers remaining as its friend.

If the U.S. follows this route, its rate of success to get the Taliban to moderate its positions is high. Since every one of these countries regards with suspicion radical jihadist ideology, it is unlikely that the Taliban be able to drive a wedge at the negotiating table between the U.S. and the other major powers and get what it wants.

iii). Looking for an Afghan Ataturk

It is possible that the Taliban will reject the request to moderate its ideology and policies as a government. It is equally possible that the U.S. does not like the brand of Afghan nationalism

promoted by the Taliban in whatever form. In that case, the U.S. can adopt a strategy that will facilitate the emergence of a secular nationalism among Afghans, a nationalism which can counter-balance the nationalism promoted by the Taliban and other religion-based groups. To realize this strategy, the U.S. can follow two routes.

The first approach starts by building a secular Afghan nationalism among the Afghan army. This approach starts, for example, when the CIA facilitates the formation of an Afghan “free officers’ movement” among the Afghanistan defense forces. The army because of organization, discipline, and its ideology of protecting the state and the glory of the nation serves as the best ground to hunt for officer who burn with the fire of patriotism and use them as the core of the free officers’ movement. The free officers’ movement nationalism, if properly managed, has the potential to serve as an alternative to the Islamist-tainted nationalism of the Taliban and other insurgent groups.

This alternative requires the CIA to look for among the Afghan officer corps for the most promising person who can provide leadership for the secret movement. It demands patient clandestine work by the CIA to nurture and protect the movement. The U.S. needs to tolerate as the army becomes a hotbed of Afghan secular nationalism.

To counteract the Taliban, what the U.S. wants to have is that Afghanistan produces its own Kamal Ataturk or Gamal Abdel Nassar. In this sense, what Afghanistan may need to have is its own version of Kamalism or Nasserism, a fire brand secular nationalism that can take the Taliban’s fundamentalist-tainted nationalism head on and win. The U.S. should let the leading army officer play the nationalist card to the full so that the people can rally behind him. But for this option to work, the Afghan people must be able to see, first that the Afghan army has become independent of the U.S.; and secondly that the movements are likely to restore Afghan sovereignty and national dignity.

If the U.S. chooses this option, then it should allow at least for two to three years for the idea to develop and garner strength. The success of this route depends on several factors:

- Can U.S. intelligence find among Afghan army an officer with fervent nationalism, someone whose intelligence, charisma and courage can be compared to that of Napoleon, Ataturk, Nasser, or Pinochet? The secular nationalists among the army can quickly consolidate power only if their Afghan Kamal Ataturk figure is a decisive tactician and an eloquent orator.
- The U.S. must encourage such Kamalism to emerge and coalesce among the Afghan army officer corps. The moment such nationalism sweeps through the ranks, the Afghan army will be a formidable fighting force against the Taliban. (Note: At this stage, the U.S. forces must recede in their presence and reduce troop levels in the country.)
- The U.S. must assist the Kamalist movement to remain secret until the time it attempts a putsch. The U.S. must do its best to protect the free officers, helping them not to be discovered and obliterated by the Taliban. Again the U.S. must not try to save the weak central government from being toppled by the free officers' movement, at some point. Letting the democratically elected government fall in this manner is not a sin. It only helps the U.S. the original conceptual error it has committed. Supporting a nationalist army group take power will put the idea of national-building first. And the army is more than likely and able to form an effective state apparatus. The only weakness in the short-run will be the democracy-building process has to be put on hold for some time in the future.
- The officers in charge of the country, whenever they request the U.S. to pull out its forces out of Afghanistan by a certain date, the U.S. must oblige. For them putting such a demand and the U.S. complying to it will make the officers popular among Afghans, even among some members of the Taliban and other Islamist groups.

The rate of success of this route could be high if managed wisely. In the past, the CIA had engineered several coup d'états in many developing countries successfully. Now the CIA can be asked to put its experience to effective use in Afghanistan. If the CIA can pull it off correctly, the free officers' movement option can facilitate America's exit from Afghanistan by handing over the country to a secular nationalist government. And as the experiences of several countries

show, a military leadership has the potential to lay the groundwork for a prosperous and democratic country. At least the experiences of Turkey, South Korea, and Chile show that much.

iv). Learning from the Iran Playbook

Iran has some important lessons to teach the U.S. in what it can do to promote its geo-political interest. Iran propagates its influence in a geo-political region through local proxy groups. The Iran approach is based on the principles of empowerment and rigorous capacity-building of local groups. Iran's geo-political playbook works through two major steps. Iran first identifies a local group with which it can collaborate with to promote a common agenda. Second, Iran assists the group to build ground up, providing it with required training and logistical support each of the way up, until the group becomes a formidable political and military force. Iran has played this strategy to remarkable success in Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, and now in Yemen. The groups Iran has nurtured in these places nearly all of them have proved resilient in taking on enemies more powerful than them. The U.S. can emulate Iran's geo-political playbook to effectively counteract against the Taliban's religious nationalism. The U.S. can focus on identifying, selecting, and nurturing one or two promising Afghan grassroots organizations to make them develop an ideology that can mobilize the Afghan population through a vision of nationalism and economic prosperity.

Nurturing Afghan nationalism among grassroots organizations is interesting to explore because not all segments of Afghan society subscribe to the conservative and theocracy-oriented ideology of the Taliban and its allied groups. It is likely and possible that in Afghanistan that various grassroots-level groups could exist in their primordial form that harbor a secular type of Afghan nationalism. These obscure groups may be just waiting for a powerful ally, like the U.S., to discover them and can galvanize them into action. Potential allies for an alternative Afghan nationalistic vision may come from any walk of life. The group the U.S. identifies and chooses to collaborate with may be sectarian, regional, or ideological in character. The group could be a rights movement among farmers, working class, university students, ethnic and religious minorities, or women. The group could also be a political party, or a professional association such as that of lawyers and journalists.

Although the U.S. must provide as much support as it can to various civil society groups and social movements, its primary focus must be expending more resources on the one organization or movement which it thinks holds the most promising potential in projecting an alternative nationalism vis-à-vis that of the Taliban. During the entire process the U.S. must premise its support to the organization on two important conditions. First, the organization must possess a clear ideology and a nationalistic agenda that the U.S. can endorse. Second, the U.S. should select and assist groups that can sustain a vision and a commitment that can neutralize or match the zeal of the Taliban and its friends.

The rate of success of the Iran playbook approach depends how much the U.S. can afford to wait to see results. This option can probably take a relatively long time to bear its fruits; however, it guarantees an enduring outcome, as the alternative Afghan nationalism is built upwards from the grassroots level. The alternative nationalistic agenda is sustainable because it does not only rest with the elite, but is equally widely disseminated among the people.

Conclusion

The U.S. has followed a misguided approach in Afghanistan since 2001. The error mainly arises from the U.S. mistake in conflating state-building with nation-building. Paradoxically, the U.S. boots-on-the ground approach (which is enhanced through series of troop surges) has undermined its declared objective of nation-building in that country. This is because, in its essence, nation-building means respecting or protecting a country's national sovereignty. Since today many Afghans do not see their government fully autonomous, they have difficulty in accepting the veracity of the U.S. mission of nation-building in their country. Inadvertently, the U.S. has violated the essence of nation-building; hence, it has instigated the hard-to-defeat nationalistic insurgency led by the Taliban. In turn, the insurgency has effectively destroyed the U.S. continued efforts in state- and democracy-building in Afghanistan. This futility arose because the U.S. has not understood the true meaning of nation-building.

It is possible for the U.S. to restore full sovereignty to Afghanistan, leaving the country peaceful and stable, and no threat to own citizens and neighboring countries. To realize this goal, the U.S. must follow two main strategies. First, by lobbying its Middle East allies such as Saudi Arabia

or by involving regional great powers in its peace negotiations with the Taliban, the U.S. can pressure the Taliban to moderate its ideology and policy stances. At the end of negotiations, the Taliban which returns to power in Kabul will be a force of moderation and not jihadism.

Second, the U.S. can eschew working with the Taliban about the future of Afghanistan, and instead choose to cultivate Afghan nationalism which is secular in character and vision. The secular nationalism the U.S. nurtures can serve U.S. interests by providing an alternative nationalism Afghans can rally around instead of supporting the religion-laced nationalism of the Taliban and its allies. The group the U.S. would sponsor can come either from the Afghan army or civil society.

The U.S. instead of spending treasure and blood to prop up a feeble and ineffective central government, should now engage in a re-think of its policy in Afghanistan and take steps that could correct the conceptual error it has committed and thereby brought it to such an impasse in Afghanistan. The re-think must give emphasis to an agenda that will help it to restore Afghanistan's national sovereignty; thereby correct the original conceptual error it committed in its presence and activities.

The U.S. honorable and satisfying exit from Afghanistan cannot begin until the day the U.S. restores Afghanistan's full national autonomy. The restoration of Afghan full sovereignty can be realized by working with a reformed Taliban or by nurturing a secular nationalist group (military or civilian). It is only then that the U.S.'s idea of nation-building in Afghanistan gets realized (as nation-building as a process demands creating or restoring full-scale national sovereignty). Only after doing this is that the U.S. has any chance to be invited back — by a sovereign Afghanistan state — to assist in state- and democracy-building.