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As of this writing, the Taliban appear on the verge of retaking Afghanistan. After 20 years the U.S. has finally called it quits on its longest war. The Taliban now reportedly control more than 12 per cent of the country, with another 34 per cent being contested, according to official U.S. statistics, which are most likely highly underestimated. The Taliban are starting to inch towards the capital, Kabul, which remains the seat of government power. This, despite an investment of [\\$18.8 billion in U.S. foreign aid](#), and a reported 2,352 U.S. deaths there.

While far from inevitable, the unravelling of the Western-oriented Afghan government seems likely, as its defence forces have relied so heavily upon U.S. air power and [special operations forces](#). The idea that the U.S. can continue significant levels of support from outside the country, as well as the loss of on-the-ground intelligence, portends a significant degradation in Kabul's ability to defend itself. In fact, the Taliban were never fully defeated, despite a wide variety of U.S. military strategies, including training the new national army, extensive use of aircraft superiority and drones, and major surges of troops.

Beyond these losses is a grudging recognition that a Taliban takeover may mean not only a potential haven for Islamic terrorists but also a sharp deterioration in conditions for [Afghan women](#). The impending disaster begs the question: How could so much be invested with no change in the outcome? Indeed, Afghanistan remains a haven for drug smuggling and a number of Islamic fundamentalist groups who are anti-Western beyond the Taliban, including groups sponsored by [al-Qaeda and ISIS](#).

In fact, the trajectory towards failure was entirely predictable, as laid out in a policy paper called [“Why Nation Building in Afghanistan is Failing”](#) in 2009. The costs of not recognizing the need for a more serious and wide-ranging investment alongside [the reluctance of U.S. leaders to accept effective failure](#) meant that a losing hand was continued for some 20 years, with no real accountability. To demonstrate how this fits into well-worn patterns of history, let's examine lessons of guerrilla warfare that have been obvious from Mao's successful Chinese revolution to [Che Guevara's recounting](#) of the lessons of the Cuban revolution. These lessons fully apply to both the U.S. debacle in Vietnam and in Afghanistan, despite being half a world and several decades apart.

The Principles of Guerrilla Warfare Still Apply

The first principle is that the ruling government must be viewed as illegitimate and incompetent, in order for a rebel to gain popular support. Popular support is needed not only to provide materiel and fighting men to a cause, but also so that the guerrilla army can blend into the scenery and avoid capture. In Afghanistan's case, the ruling government never provided basic services or security for the population. Instead of helping to support its makeover, Western aid instead fuelled [endemic corruption](#). In fact, the U.S. government's own [special inspector general](#) produced report after report that reflected widespread corruption and an inability to train local troops and



police for any kind of independent capability. These reports were ignored, just as reports of the South Vietnamese government's corruption and illegitimacy were ignored in the 1960s. The war on drugs to which the U.S. committed itself was devastating, cutting off the income of thousands of Afghan farmers. These farmers then turned to the Taliban for both security and sales networks, thus providing a ready means of financial sustenance for the group through opiate sales.

A corollary to this first principle is that a government that is divided is unable to present a united front. By the nature of the U.S.-led occupation, the installed government was bound to be tainted as a "foreign puppet," a moniker the Taliban frequently invoked. Afghanistan, the graveyard of empires, has a long history of resistance to foreign intervention, as the Soviets learned to their chagrin in the 1980s. The government in Kabul attempted to create centralized control in a space that is inherently divided by geography (with harsh mountainous landscapes preventing easy flow) and ethnicity. The latter reflects a variety of regional groups, such as the Hazara in central Afghanistan and the Tajiks in the north, as opposed to the Pashtun from whom most of the Taliban derive. Lacking infrastructure, military control or legitimacy among the disparate groups, the central government resorted to a patron-clientelism that naturally undermined the goal of creating a new governing system that could unite the country. In the last election, both Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah claimed victory. In practice, [the country depended on regional chiefs](#) who owed no particular loyalty to the government and did not establish any real fealty to it through competent administration.

The second key principle is geography. As Che notes, the guerrilla thrives in the countryside. Like the jungles of South Vietnam, the mountains of Afghanistan provide ready refuge for the Taliban. With U.S. support, the government can control central cities, but it never gained control of the countryside, even during the height of the surge. The Taliban could simply melt away, and in classic guerrilla fashion, choose ambush and bombings to peck away at the soldiers stuck on their bases for security reasons, like sitting ducks. Lacking popular support, intelligence and loyalty, it's altogether understandable that a peasant farmer will not declare allegiance to a government that cannot protect him or her or provide a means of livelihood.

Also, as seen in Vietnam, there is the inability to ensure the security of porous borders. In Afghanistan's case, the border with Pakistan offered a ready flight path for both Osama bin Laden and the Taliban so the government could never soundly defeat them or capture their leaders. On the contrary, [Pakistan was actively engaged in supporting the Taliban](#), a vestige from its earlier support of the Islamic-based rebellion against the Soviets, which was then aided by the U.S. The U.S. never showed the will to hold Pakistan accountable for this support, thus ensuring a central contradiction to its own stated aims. Pakistan's support is a reflection of its own internal politics; where fundamentalism holds sway, its internal control is limited. Pakistan's Taliban support, furthermore, recognizes the power of Pashtun groups and allied forces such as the Haqqani network, within its porous, and in places, largely lawless border areas with Afghanistan. Moreover, Pakistan's ongoing support of pro-autonomy Muslim guerrillas in Kashmir serves to solidify the central role of the military and Islamic fundamentalist influence in government. Its ongoing rivalry with India, which forged close ties to Kabul, further polarized the situation. The situation is no different than that of Laos and Cambodia, which the Nixon administration illegally



bombed to disrupt Ho Chi Minh Trail supply lines, to no avail but at great cost to local populations. These people, like the opium farmers, were subsequently more likely to be anti-U.S. and support the rebels against foreign occupiers. Pakistan furthermore recognized the U.S.'s unwillingness to expand the conflict, considering it was bogged down in Iraq and Syria with another war. Pakistan's ability to tie itself more closely to China has lessened its dependence on U.S. aid.

The third principle is that the guerrilla never engages in open, direct conflict with the enemy army. Ambush hit and run disrupts everyday life and the economy via bombs and attacks on infrastructure and markets. Maintaining a cell formation where there is, at best, loose command-and-control formation, means guerrillas can rarely be defeated, even when the leaders are captured. As we see in [Colombia](#), even when a major rebel group lays down its arms, if there is no plan for incorporating and placating the retired warriors, or there is retaliation, then fighting can continue indefinitely. Free and fair elections alone do not come close to solving structural problems of racism and inequality. These factors originally led to the [rebellion](#) and they instil communism's promises in the poorest and most marginalized groups of society. As long as serious social issues continue, they can provide the fuel of discontent for the support of rebels, whether grudging, tacit or open, that enables them to disappear into the population.

Non-violent Pathways to Influence the Taliban

There are many clear and enduring lessons from the U.S. experience in Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam, beginning with the lack of understanding of the local context, key actors and absence of planning for what a stable, rebuilt state should look like. There is also a sense of hubris around the limits of U.S./Western power. Afghanistan's tolerance for corruption naturally created a client state in which allegiance is tied to payments, not belief in a greater cause. Most distressingly, the understanding that security is not only built upon military occupation, but also political support and the development of competent institutions is lacking. Perhaps the least palatable aspect is that all of these factors were acknowledged in each of the conflicts, yet no one could or was willing to change course. Instead, the answers always veered towards military solutions, in the hopes that a surge of more of the same would change something. As [described in 2009](#), nation-building requires a thorough process of decades and an understanding across factors that seem beyond U.S. foreign policy capacity or analysis at the moment.

The more pressing question is, what levers does the U.S. have to influence a future Taliban government in the most vital issues of global security and the plight of Afghan women? The ironic thing about politics is that sometimes the rebels win and have to govern. The fractious coalition of the Taliban, like other rebel alliances, is united against foreign occupation and generally shares more traditional values, but one can foresee serious challenges if they return to power. The first challenge is the aforementioned ethnic and regional divisions, exacerbated by the interplay of regional powers. Iran and India are not likely to support the Taliban, with Iranians being Shi'a and Indians seeing the Taliban as Pakistani allies. Central Asian countries bordering Afghanistan, such as Uzbekistan, provide other conduits for Russian or Western influence as well as safe havens



for a potential renewed Northern Alliance. While China offers tacit support to Pakistan and the Taliban, such an alliance could easily fall apart given China's concerns about its Muslim population and Pakistan's concerns about [its own Taliban and fundamentalist groups](#). In fact, the natural and human geography suggests Afghanistan could fall into regional entities along ethnic lines. The U.S. invasion relied on the Northern Alliance to conquer the Taliban in 2001.

On top of this, foreign support (principally from the Middle East) of other Islamist groups such as the Islamic State, or the Pakistani [Haqqani network](#), could equally undermine Taliban rule. It is hard to believe that the Taliban could, for example, continue to openly support opiate production and export without suffering from major sanctions from other states and other groups could vigorously contest that control.

Once in power, the Taliban are subject to [the same vices](#) of corruption and ineffective institutions as the current regime. The Taliban leaders' personal wealth is likely kept abroad, and thus is vulnerable to the same types of sanctions that have rattled Russian leaders. More importantly, the West could place comprehensive sanctions on a Taliban government and its partners in the same crippling way it has for [Iran](#), in order to extract concessions on security, particularly eliminating havens for global terrorism, and for the rights of women.

While in general the [Taliban have provided a greater sense of security](#), less corruption and some basic health and education services in the areas they control, it is still at a local level compared to running a national government. This offers a more positive road towards influence, namely seeking to co-operate with the Taliban to modernize the Afghan state. As I explain in my [book](#) on human nature, evolutionary biology, neuroscience and political history tell us that egoism and tribalism are natural tendencies. Confronting someone is more likely to lead to resistance; it is a much more arduous task to persuade them. History tells us that persuasion and lasting change are much more likely when there is a period of stability and peace, one that allows for a diminution of the fight-or-flight response that creates a cycle of mutual hostility and defensiveness. In the longer view, it is more likely that a new generation of Afghans who grow up in peace can be persuaded to abandon fundamentalism. [Soft power](#) through economic and social exchange, including trade, investment, travel and cultural and intellectual exchange are a necessary complement to confrontation, one that has not been seriously attempted in Afghanistan. What do we have to lose by trying?

► About the Author

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