



## **The Afghanistan Collapse: Inspector General Finds US Spent 20 Years Building a Dependent Potemkin Nation**

Doug Bandow

June 1, 2022

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has driven most other foreign policy issues from the front page. To prove that administration officials can fuel war with Russia and confront China at the same time, President Joe Biden visited Asia. His apparent gaffe regarding Taiwan garnered the most attention.

Largely ignored have been other important events. In the Middle East American officials are doing a full "suck up" to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates; worse, the administration appears ready to sacrifice the nuclear agreement with Iran to Israeli pressure. In Africa the Biden administration has returned US forces to Somalia. The Left is on the rise in Latin America, and is challenging Washington's plan to exclude Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela from the upcoming Summit of the Americas.

Afghanistan remains a security black hole and humanitarian catastrophe. It is a matter of faith to the War Party that if the US had kept a few troops on station for a few more years all would have been well as the lion lay down with the lamb. However, a new report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) indicates that this Neocon verity is ideological tripe.

In fact, the US-backed government likely would have survived only so long as Americans remained to fight the Taliban. Despite three successive US administrations devoting two decades and billions (actually, hundreds of billions) of dollars, and allied forces suffering thousands of casualties, little established by Washington in Afghanistan would have survived on its own.

And nothing at stake in Afghanistan warranted America staying. Washington has no significant interests inherent to Central Asia, which is about as far from the US as anywhere on earth and is bounded by several global and regional powers: China, Russia, India, Iran, and Pakistan. All have serious security interests in Afghanistan, which they would have had to address without Washington's presence – as they have discovered after the US left.

The Bush administration intervened to destroy or disable al-Qaeda for attacking America and punish the Taliban for hosting the terrorist organization. US forces quickly succeeded; so complete was their victory that the Taliban sought to negotiate its de facto surrender. However, arrogant and self-righteous from start to finish, Dubya & Co. foolishly refused. The rest, including abundant death and destruction in that tragic land, is history.

Although residents of Afghanistan's largest cities tended to benefit from the allied presence, not so rural Afghanistan, in which the war was primarily fought. Baktash Ahadi, an interpreter for the US, explained how Afghans viewed the fight: "Virtually the only contact most Afghans had with the West came via heavily armed and armored combat troops. Americans thus mistook the Afghan countryside for a mere theater of war, rather than as a place where people actually lived. U.S. forces turned villages into battlegrounds, pulverizing mud homes and destroying livelihoods. One could almost hear the Taliban laughing as any sympathy for the West evaporated in bursts of gunfire." Which made America, along with the corrupt, incompetent, unreliable, and distant Kabul government, an enemy. Added Ahadi, "When comparing the Taliban with the United States and its Western allies, the vast majority of Afghans have always viewed the Taliban as the lesser of two evils."

However, no one in Washington wanted to admit the truth. US officialdom insisted that progress was being made irrespective of the experience on the ground. The Washington Post's Craig Whitlock detailed this persistent dishonesty in the "Afghanistan Papers." He reported that "senior US officials failed to tell the truth about the war in Afghanistan throughout the 18-year campaign, making rosy pronouncements they knew to be false and hiding unmistakable evidence the war had become unwinnable."

When official data demonstrated failure, the Trump administration asked the classic question: who are you going to believe, me or your lying eyes? Then officials denied the public access to the facts. Andrew Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies reported that "Open source reporting on the course of the fighting is highly controversial – to the point where the U.S.-led command has canceled reporting on Afghan government vs. Taliban control and influence, and no longer reports on many aspects of ANSF operational capabilities."

Yet after the Kabul government's collapse Washington professed to be shocked to find that it had built a Potemkin nation. The critical factor was the disintegration of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). What happened? SIGAR concluded: "the single most important factor in the ANDSF's collapse in August 2021 was the US decision to withdraw military forces and contractors from Afghanistan," reflected in both the agreement signed by the Trump administration and the withdrawal ordered by the Biden administration.

Explained SIGAR: "Due to the ANDSF's dependency on US military forces, these events destroyed ANDSF morale. The ANDSF had long relied on the US military's presence to protect against large-scale ANDSF losses, and Afghan troops saw the United States as a means of holding their government accountable for paying their salaries. The U.S.-Taliban agreement made it clear that this was no longer the case, resulting in a sense of abandonment within the ANDSF and the Afghan population."

Members of the War Party, who never found a conflict which they believed other Americans should not fight, concluded that Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden were to blame for leaving. However, the Afghan civil war, which dated back four decades, was not America's battle. As for the threat of terrorism, attempting to permanently occupy every spot on earth where a hostile group could possibly operate is a doomed strategy. Al-Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan triggered what should have been a temporary response. Then the US should have left. Staying, not leaving, was Washington's mistake. Especially when failing to create a viable Afghan state.

Tragically, US policy ensured a hopelessly dependent Afghan forces. For instance, "Limiting airstrikes after the signing of the U.S.-Taliban agreement the following year left the ANDSF without a key advantage in keeping the Taliban at bay. Next, the ANDSF remained reliant on the US military in part because the United States designed the ANDSF as a mirror image of US forces. This created long-term ANDSF dependencies. The United States created a combined arms military structure that required a high degree of professional military sophistication and leadership." Alone, the Afghan air forces was not up to the task. "As a result, ANDSF units complained that they did not have enough ammunition, food, water, or other military equipment to sustain military engagements against the Taliban."

Washington underestimated what was necessary to create a self-sustaining force. Detailed SIGAR:

"no one country or agency had ownership of the ANDSF development mission. Instead, ownership existed within a NATO-led coalition and with temporary organizations, such as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), Resolute Support, and the Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan. All of these entities were staffed with a constantly changing rotation of military and civilian advisors. The constant personnel turnover impeded continuity and institutional memory. The result was an uncoordinated approach that plagued the entire mission."

Worse, perhaps, "the length of the US commitment was disconnected from a realistic understanding of the time required to build a self-sustaining security sector – a process that took decades to achieve in South Korea. Constantly changing and politically driven milestones for US engagement undermined the its [sic] ability to set realistic goals for building a capable and self-sustaining military and police force."

The fault was not that successive American administrations failed to take extra time, since US interests did not warrant such an effort. Rather, the error was to imagine that the process could be completed in reasonable time at reasonable cost.

Afghans know how to fight. It made no sense to expect them do so like Americans. Yet at almost every turn the US made Afghans dependent on Western aid. Explained SIGAR: "For example, battlefield success was critical to create the conditions necessary to draw down US combat forces. But because US troops were far more effective at fighting, they often led missions or filled critical gaps in missions – providing close air support, airstrikes, medical evacuation, logistics, and intelligence gathering – at the expense of the ANDSF gaining experience fighting

on its own. As a result, the Afghan National Army became overly reliant on borrowed capabilities."

Equally foolish, though undoubtedly profitable for America's military-industrial complex – which also is the biggest beneficiary of the US aid program for Ukraine – "the United States created more long-term dependencies by providing the ANDSF with advanced military equipment that they could not sustain and that required a US military or contractor presence. Additionally, starting in 2005, DOD received congressional authorization to implement a pseudo Foreign Military Sales process that removed the Afghan government from any formal role in the equipping process. From 2005 on, the United States had sole responsibility for requirements for ANDSF equipment, the fulfillment of those requirements, and the payment for items procured."

After devoting so much money and effort into the desperate effort to create effective Afghan military and police forces, the US could not judge the project's effectiveness. Noted SIGAR:

"the United States lacked any real yardstick for measuring the ANDSF's development. The metrics DOD used were inconsistent and unable to measure the development of ANDSF capabilities and capacities over time. Since 2005, the US metrics used by the military focused primarily on inputs and outputs, masking performance-degrading factors such as poor leadership and corruption. During the US military surge, measurement methods changed five times, making long-term tracking of ANDSF progress impossible. Despite the goal of developing a self-sustaining ANDSF, the highest recorded measurement of progress during the US military's transition of security to the ANDSF was 'independent with advisors,' a complete disconnect from DOD's stated objective."

Obviously, this issue mattered most to the government in Kabul. Yet Washington kept its supposed allies dependent even in access to information. Concluded SIGAR:

"over the 20-year mission, the Afghan government lacked ownership and access to important Afghan systems responsible for tracking ANDSF personnel and equipment. Senior Afghan government officials told SIGAR that despite having staff responsible for human resource management and procurement, these staff members did not have the ability to independently access and modify accountability systems. To access and manipulate ANDSF data, senior Afghan officials had to request readouts from US contractors embedded in the Ministries of Defense and Interior. This lack of trust also manifested in the field, where US forces internally planning operations would give ANDSF-partnered units only limited notice of operations, due to fears that the ANDSF would leak plans to the Taliban. At times, according to retired General David Barno, ANDSF field units were simply 'window dressing' to U.S.-led operations."

America's involvement in Afghanistan suffered from continuous FUBAR. However, the fault for Afghanistan's collapse wasn't entirely Washington's. US policymakers presumed political competence and courage that was lacking in Kabul. The Afghan government failed to prepare for an American pullout. It appeared to see little reason to do so. After all, the Blob, as the US foreign policy establishment is known, as well as the US military, had thwarted Trump throughout his term, and Afghans saw his withdrawal plan as a negotiating tactic.

Reported SIGAR: "the Afghan government failed to develop a national security strategy and plan for nationwide security following the withdrawal of US forces. Instead, former President Ashraf Ghani frequently changed ANDSF leaders and appointed loyalists, while marginalizing well-trained ANDSF officers aligned with the United States. The constant turnover weakened military chains of command, trust, and morale in the ANDSF. Young, well trained, educated, and professional ANDSF officers who grew up under U.S. tutelage were marginalized and their ties to the US became a liability." The Taliban took full advantage of these mistakes.

America's Afghanistan misadventure was an extraordinary tragedy. The Bush administration had an opportunity to support creation of a new government that included representation for the Taliban. Alas, arrogant overreach lost Washington that chance, and eventually the Afghan people chose the devil they knew over the uninvited foreigners. Forget complaints that Washington's premature withdrawal lost the war. US policy ensured that Afghanistan would never become a liberal, independent republic aligned with America.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.*