

ISSUE BRIEF

LESSONS FROM AFGHANISTAN FOR WESTERN STATE-BUILDING IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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Abdur Rahman Khan, the nineteenth-century Afghan ruler, once described his country as “a poor goat on whom the lion and the bear have both fixed their eyes.”¹ During his time, the “lion” was Great Britain and the “bear” was Russia—both great powers that had interests and competition in Afghanistan. Abdur Rahman chose to receive a subsidy for his army from Britain; in return, he agreed that Afghanistan would function as a neutral buffer between the two empires. The result was decades of relative stability for Afghanistan. Under Abdur Rahman's leadership, Afghanistan was undemocratic, foreign sponsored, and so violent and oppressive that Thomas Barfield termed it “Internal Imperialism.”² Yet, Abdur Rahman died peacefully in his bed, having spent twenty years being a brutal dictator but a decent great-power competition strategist. His regime survived to the time of his grandson.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the United States and its NATO allies had assumed the role of the “lion.” This time, seeking “security from terrorism,” rather than a buffer from Russia, the West funded a state-building project in Afghanistan that led to the election of the country's first democratic government.³ Twenty years and \$2.3 trillion later, the West was ready to withdraw.⁴

- 1 Abd al Rahman Khan, *The Life of Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan* (London: J. Murray, 1900).
- 2 Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).
- 3 Barnett Rubin, “The Once and Future Defeat in Afghanistan,” *War on the Rocks*, November 1, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/11/the-once-and-future-defeat-in-afghanistan/>.
- 4 “U.S. Costs to Date for the War in Afghanistan, in \$ Billions FY2001-FY2022,” Watson Institute, Brown University.

However, the Western state-building project in Afghanistan did not occur in a vacuum. In 2000, the West was nearing a full decade of unipolarity in which it was the seat of the preponderance of global power. By 2021, however, the world had reached an “inflection point,” in which authoritarian and fundamentally anti-liberal authoritarian states like Russia and China were amassing, and continue to amass, power.⁵ In terms of power politics, the world in 2021 looked much more like it did during Abdur Rahman’s time than it did just twenty years earlier.

The emergent multipolar world has created new challenges for Western liberal democratic diplomats and leaders. Among these challenges is how to continue to support developing allies in a political landscape where these allies are facing growing, existential threats from powerful, authoritarian anti-liberal states.

A never-before-shared internal document developed by the National Security Threat Assessment and Policy interagency committee in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in the days before it collapsed highlights these challenges. The purpose of the National Threat Assessment (NTA) was to identify global and regional trends and power shifts that could pose existential threats to the state, so the government could craft a response, presumably in coordination with its Western allies. The NTA was based on information and intelligence gathered by the Afghanistan Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense and the National Directorate of Intelligence (NDS) through their foreign and domestic collection capabilities. It achieved the former, but the latter never materialized. Instead, the West exited, and Afghanistan fell to the Taliban. However, the NTA can still help the West navigate its other relationships with weak allies in this increasingly multipolar world.

A Failed Western-Led State-Building Project

Isolation Led to Regional Taliban Support

In the years leading up to the Taliban takeover, China, Russia, and Iran had been steadily increasing their material and diplomatic aid to the Taliban.⁶ These states did not always support the Taliban in Afghanistan, however.

Traditionally, Russia supported anti-Taliban forces, such as the so-called Northern Alliance, whose political and military cadres were integrated into the post-9/11 democratic state. The NTA found that Russia made a U-turn and began supporting the Taliban sometime between 2014 and 2015. The “bear” had resumed its historical role of competing with the West in Afghanistan.

According to the NTA, the reason for this U-turn was the failure of the Afghan government to establish active diplomatic relationships with regional powers, including Russia. This failure, Afghan analysts concluded, was a key source of Russian behavior.

Throughout its short life, the Afghan government actively avoided establishing diplomatic relationships with Western adversaries, including Russia, Iran, and China. Memories of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and Western support of the Afghan mujahideen were still fresh. The new democratic Afghan government hoped that, by isolating itself from Western adversaries, it would avoid returning to the old days of active great-power competition within its borders.

In 2019, the Afghan government realized it had miscalculated. Between 2019 and 2021, former President Ashraf Ghani—as a tactic to find regional allies in the hopes of balancing growing US disinterest in his government—made several efforts to present his country to the Russian government as a neutral state.⁷ During meetings with his national security staff, Ghani emphasized the importance of regional embeddedness for state survival, repeatedly telling his

5 Richard Haass and Charles A. Kupchan, “The New Concert of Powers,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 13, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-03-23/new-concert-powers>; Robert Kagan, “The Strongmen Strike Back,” *Washington Post*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/opinions/wp/2019/03/14/feature/the-strongmen-strike-back/>.

6 Nilofar Sakhi, *How Russia, China, and Iran Will Shape Afghanistan’s Future*, *Atlantic Council*, June 21, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-russia-china-and-iran-will-shape-afghanistans-future/>.

7 Jack Detsch and Robbie Gramer, “U.S. Questioned Whether Afghan Government Could Survive Taliban Onslaught,” *Foreign Policy*, June 30, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/30/state-department-afghan-government-ghani-taliban-question/>.

personnel: “Our future is in the region.”⁸ But—as with most of his plans for Afghanistan’s future—Ghani’s regional-engagement strategy turned out to be based on wishful thinking.

Afghan bids for a new relationship with Moscow were not well received by Russia. The last Afghan government delegation made its final attempt in Spring 2021, to no avail.⁹ In a meeting of the Afghan delegation with Nikolai Patrushev (secretary of Russia’s Security Council and close friend of President Vladimir Putin), the Russian government called the Afghan government an “extended outpost of the US” and criticized it for never meaningfully engaging Moscow.¹⁰ In another meeting with senior officials at their Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian representatives accused the Afghan government of harboring bad feelings against Russia. Based on reports of these meetings, one unnamed Russian official said: “It has been years since we officially asked your government to reconstruct the local road near the Russian embassy in Kabul, but the Kabul municipality is yet to be ordered to start the work. That is the level of attention your President paid us throughout these years.”¹¹ Russia began actively engaging the Taliban in 2014.¹² It covertly provided tactical capabilities (e.g., night-vision and drone capabilities) to the Taliban, and offered rewards to militants who killed US troops, shifting the balance of power relative to Afghan forces.¹³ It also used its diplomatic capabilities to embed the Taliban in anti-Western diplomatic spheres, holding joint meetings with Iran and China, as well as acting as a guarantor between the Taliban and the regional countries under the influence of Russia. Evidence, including pictures and other details of these meetings, were retrieved by former Afghan government intelligence agencies.

Kabul Never Owned Its Own Security

Adding to the power imbalance between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic was the fact that Kabul never manifested full ownership over its national security apparatus. The United States invested \$83 billion in the former Afghanistan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).¹⁴ However, the Afghan government never fully consolidated its control over the technical and operational aspects of the military that Washington built. This created an atmosphere of dysfunction and corruption that undermined Afghan security forces’ confidence in the young government and, ultimately, contributed to their decision to lay down their arms. The ANDSF was heavily reliant on US airpower, logistics, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), and on international contractors, to function at the basic level. This remained true throughout the ANDSF’s entire existence, up to the Western withdrawal and state collapse in August 2021.

The Failure of the Afghan Payroll and Pay System

Exemplifying this lack of ownership are the numerous technical failures that crippled the Afghan government’s capacity to recruit and pay ANDSF personnel. Officials and staff at the Ministries of Defense and Interior did not know key details about how to operate the Afghan Payroll and Pay System (APPS), which would have allowed them to figure out the numbers of officers and soldiers, and to accommodate forces as the fighting intensified.¹⁵

APPS was also never optimized to meet the needs of the Afghan government. The APPS required every new ANDSF recruit and volunteer to complete certain

8 Quote obtained from a brief of a meeting between former President Ghani and his national security staff members, one of whom was the author, on February 16, 2021.

9 “Atmar Travels to Moscow to Discuss Afghan Peace: Mofa,” TOLONews, February 24, 2021, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-170256>.

10 Quote obtained from the report of the Afghan delegation on its trip to Moscow to the president of Afghanistan on March 3, 2021.

11 Ibid.

12 Mujib Mashal and Michael Schwartz, “How Russia Built a Channel to the Taliban, Once an Enemy,” *New York Times*, July 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/13/world/asia/russia-taliban-afghanistan.html>.

13 Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt, and Michael Schwartz, “Russia Secretly Offered Afghanistan Militants Bounties to Kill U.S. Troops, Intelligence Says,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/us/politics/russia-afghanistan-bounties.html>; Justin Rowlett, “Russia ‘Arming the Afghan Taliban,’ Says US,” BBC News, March 23, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43500299>.

14 “What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction,” Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, August 2021, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>.

15 Aaron Gregg, “U.S. Taxpayers Paid Millions for Afghan Payroll System that Doesn’t Work as Intended, DOD Audit Says,” *Washington Post*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/08/23/us-taxpayers-paid-million-afghan-payroll-system-that-doesnt-work-intended-dod-audit-says/>.

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“modules” before they could receive a salary.¹⁶ These modules entailed a series of stepped requirements, leading to the release of salary, that posed an enormous practical barrier to obtaining new recruits and redeploying existing ones.¹⁷ For example, one of the modules required the ministries to obtain biometrics from recruits who were stationed in far-flung parts of the country.¹⁸ Obtaining such biometric information, such as fingerprints, was time consuming and caused long delays in paying salaries.¹⁹

Officers and soldiers went months without salaries while trying to survive in countryside checkpoints, where they were surrounded by the enemy and supplied only by air.²⁰ Ultimately, they accepted the Taliban’s offer of surrender, receiving 5,000 Afghani in cash to go toward their salaries.²¹ A few of them observed to the author that “when we took the money from the Taliban and gave them our weapons and left the check post, we felt we got out of prison.”²²

Another requirement established by APPS was age: recruits could not be more than thirty years old.²³ However, most potential recruits with warfighting experience were in their forties—a result of the fact that the last war they had fought ended twenty years ago. The volunteers introduced by Afghan political leaders, mostly veterans of other wars, were simply too old to enroll in the security forces. As a result, ANDSF recruits were extremely green, and most of them had no prior experience in warfighting.²⁴

APPS also made it difficult for the government to register existing soldiers and officers in a timely manner.²⁵ The most formidable example of this was the effort to register the twenty-thousand-strong Afghan Local Police (ALP) in APPS. The ALP was created and trained by US Special Forces to provide security for villages and the immediate terrain to cities. When the Ministry of Interior tried to transfer a percentage of them to APPS, the technical process took months.²⁶

This led to massive salary delays, devastating ALP morale. As such, most ALP members—who were the first line of defense in the countryside—walked away, leaving their positions and selling their weapons. When another segment of the Afghan Local Police transitioned to function as the Afghan Territorial Army (ATA) under the Ministry of Defense in 2019, the inability of the APPS to process these new employees (it required biometrics of soldiers who were fighting in isolated checkpoints) led to a six-month delay in salaries. Almost twenty thousand ALP forces—who were engaged in active warfighting against the Taliban—melted away after months of waiting and fighting without salaries or certainty. The process of registering ALP officers in APPS was still incomplete when the government collapsed.²⁷

The strict requirements in APPS were rightfully in place to counter ghost soldiers and corruption; however, APPS was not aligned with, or customized for, the practical realities of the Afghan war.²⁸ This caused the Afghan government to reroute volunteers and new recruits to the National Directorate of Security (NDS),

16 “Operation Freedom’s Sentinel: Report to the U.S. Congress,” Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, March 31, 2016, https://oig.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2018-06/lig_oco_ofs_03312016_0.pdf.

17 Ibid.

18 “Report to the United States Congress,” Special Inspector General, July 30, 2021, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterly-reports/2021-07-30qr-section2-security.pdf>.

19 Jonathan Schroden, “Afghanistan’s Security Forces versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, January 2021, <https://ctc.usma.edu/afghanistans-security-forces-versus-the-taliban-a-net-assessment/>. Supporting evidence also obtained from an internal Afghan Ministry of Interior detailed report on the status of personal salaries and APPS enrollment, dated May 9, 2021.

20 Patrick Wintour, “A Tale of Two Armies: Why Afghan Forces Proved No Match for the Taliban,” *Guardian*, August 15, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/15/a-tale-of-two-armies-why-afghan-forces-proved-no-match-for-the-taliban>.

21 National Directorate of Security report on the Taliban’s strategy and compensation for Afghan forces’ surrender, dated June 22, 2021.

22 Quote obtained during a telephone conversation between the author of this report and Afghan soldiers.

23 Information obtained from an internal Afghan Ministry of Interior detailed report on the status of personal salaries and APPS enrollment, dated May 9, 2021.

24 Jeff Schogol, “Afghan Forces That Supposedly ‘Have the Capacity’ to Defend Their Country Still Rely on US Airstrikes,” Task and Purpose, July 24 2021, <https://taskandpurpose.com/pentagon-run-down/us-airstrikes-afghanistan-kandahar/>.

25 “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan,” US Department of Defense, December 2020, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Apr/23/2002626546/-1/-1/0/ENHANCING-SECURITY-AND-STABILITY-IN-AFGHANISTAN.PDF>.

26 Author’s reflection from firsthand experience working with the Ministry of Interior on the transfer.

27 Ibid.

28 Schroden, “Afghanistan’s Security Forces versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment.”

which was paid for with the Afghan government's own money, to use them as paramilitary in defense of cities and urban centers. As an intelligence agency, the NDS was overburdened, and eventually became less effective in both intelligence and paramilitary force management.²⁹

Contractors

In Afghanistan, numerous government programs—as well as the Afghan Air Force's (AAF) and the ANDSF's operational and technical assets—were dependent on US and NATO military contractors. Contractors had a role in almost all major governance and security matters. They were hired to carry out programs intended to empower women, teach strategies to high-ranking ministry officials, create policies and budgets, and serve as air-traffic controllers for civilian and military aircrafts and support for ANDSF and US forces.

In total, nearly eighteen thousand contractors worked alongside the US and NATO troops inside Afghanistan. The maintenance of most of the military equipment—air force, army, and police—was dependent on these contractors.³⁰ With these contractors departing, a hasty transition was planned to find companies in the region to do the maintenance. The problem was no affordable options in the region were familiar with NATO standards. As a result, during the last days, the Afghan Air Force could not provide air coverage to more than two places at one time.³¹ In a meeting with President Ghani in summer 2021, Washington observed that the problem with equipment and support would get worse before it got better, but that the US team would position itself nearby in the region to provide continued support to Afghans. The situation never had a chance to get better. When the contractors left suddenly in the summer of 2021, they left a massive hole in the security apparatus of the fragile country, which immediately collapsed.

In June 2021, two months before the collapse, the government hired a contractor to discuss the supply of a range of systems and services that their company could make available quickly to fill the gaps that were already hurting the ANDSF.³² The contractor traveled to Kabul and met with President Ghani, as well as his national security team. They proposed the establishment of an Air Operations Center in Kabul to maintain and improve the operational capability of the AAF, supply and overhaul Mi-24/35 helicopters, and supply Mi-17 helicopters. They also agreed to supply Meteorite loitering munitions to reinforce the ground capability of Afghan forces.³³ Their quickest timeline for doing all of this was one year; the fate of the Afghan government was decided in months. Ultimately, the capabilities of the AAF and the ANDSF were significantly improved by US support. However, maintaining these capabilities was dependent on the presence of contractors, the preponderance of whom packed their bags before US and NATO troops.

The lack of security ownership, and the mounting power imbalance between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, left the young democracy completely dependent on the continuation of Western resolve to provide long-term security. This dependence ultimately proved fatal when mounting Western disillusionment gave way to withdrawal in 2021.

Regional Taliban Support Undermined Western Resolve

The NTA correctly identified Western disillusionment with Afghanistan as a key existential threat. The report stated: "There is grave disillusionment about the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan among our international partners. The United States and our NATO allies are frustrated with the lack of progress in the war, and want to get out, regardless of the result of the peace negotiation with the Taliban."³⁴ Aware of their country's reliance on the continuation of Western

29 Information obtained from the 2021 defense strategy the Afghan government adopted, which placed the paramilitary force management on NDS.

30 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Helene Cooper, and Eric Schmitt. "Departure of U.S. Contractors Poses Myriad Problems for Afghan Military," *New York Times*, June 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/19/world/asia/Afghanistan-withdrawal-contractors.html>.

31 James Cunningham and Joseph Windrem, "What Happened to the Afghan Air Force?" *Air University Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, January 7, 2022, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/2891279/what-happened-to-the-afghan-air-force/>.

32 Jonathan Schroden, "Lessons from the Collapse of Afghanistan's Security Forces," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, October 21, 2021, <https://ctc.usma.edu/lessons-from-the-collapse-of-afghanistans-security-forces/>.

33 Information provided to the Afghan government by an unnamed private security company in a report titled "Briefing Note: Support to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan" in June 2021.

34 "Draft National Threat Assessment," Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2021.

assistance, the NTA conducted a root-cause analysis of Western disillusionment.

The analysis focused on two sources of Western disillusionment. The first was the perceived incompetence and corruption of the Afghan state. In young developing democracies, corruption is often a compensatory mechanism for changing ineffective, or not yet well-trusted, institutions. Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 was no exception.³⁵

The second—and in the eyes of Afghan analysts, primary—reason for Western disillusionment uncovered in the NTA was that Russia, Iran, and China had become active opponents of the West’s mission in the country. The NTA stated: “[Western] disillusionment is partly because of corruption and government ineffectiveness, but mostly because regional powers such as Russia, China and Iran are competing with the United States in Afghanistan. In this toxic environment, our allies, particularly the United States, are going towards total disengagement which can have grave national security consequences for the state.”³⁶

What the report refers to as an increasingly “toxic environment,” political scientists would call an increasingly costly environment. As the West learned, building a country from the ground up is incredibly difficult, time consuming, and costly. By the time Western adversaries like Russia started ramping up their engagement in Afghanistan in the mid-2010s, large numbers of Western voters had already grown tired of the “forever war,” adding loss of political support to the growing list of costs for Western politicians who supported the war in Afghanistan.³⁷

Growing regional support for the Taliban—such as the military aid provided by Russia—made Afghanistan a

more dangerous environment for Western troops and, thus, increased the costs of war. This had a wasting effect on the resolve of Western politicians, whose voters held them politically accountable.³⁸ Increasing military and diplomatic support for the Taliban lowered the chances that the Islamic Republic would be able to survive without Western support in even the medium run, well beyond the timeframe in which Western voters were pushing for withdrawal.

Unilateral US-Taliban Negotiations Strengthened the Taliban and Undermined Kabul

Ultimately, the West decided it was not worthwhile to continue its investment in the republic that it built. Washington made its first “serious attempt” to negotiate a peaceful end to the war in 2010.³⁹ This effort—as well as all subsequent efforts to convince the Taliban to accept peace in the newly democratic Afghanistan—was unsuccessful.

The Western search for an exit strategy in Afghanistan led it to initiate unilateral talks with the Taliban in 2018.⁴⁰ US diplomats hoped to negotiate the withdrawal of US forces and convince the Taliban to engage in its own talks with the Islamic Republic in Kabul.

The unilateral US-Taliban negotiations had neither the Afghan government’s presence nor the blessing of Washington’s hesitant European allies. In the eyes of the Taliban and Western adversaries, the opening of a direct channel of communication between the United States and the Taliban legitimized the Taliban as an entity that could have “positive and constructive relations with other countries,” to quote a 2018 Taliban statement.⁴¹ Western adversaries seized on the newfound Taliban legitimacy as an opportunity to inject themselves into the peace process; in 2018,

35 Philip Keefer, “Democratization and Clientelism: Why are Young Democracies Badly Governed?” Inter-American Development Bank, May 2005, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=748364>.

36 “Draft National Threat Assessment.”

37 Michael E. O’Hanlon, “5,000 Troops for 5 Years: A No Drama Approach to Afghanistan for the Next US President,” Brookings, December 9, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/bigideas/5000-troops-for-5-years-a-no-drama-approach-to-afghanistan-for-the-next-us-president/>.

38 Michael T. Koch and Stephen P. Nicholson, “Death and Turnout: The Human Costs of War and Voter Participation in Democracies,” *American Journal of Political Science* 60, 4, 2015, 932–946.

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

40 Clayton Thomas, “Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy: In Brief,” Congressional Research Service, February 17, 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R45122.pdf>.

41 Maria Kiselyova, “Taliban Attends Peace Talks in Moscow for First Time, No Progress Reported,” Reuters, November 9, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-afghanistan-taliban/taliban-attends-peace-talks-in-moscow-for-first-time-no-progress-reported-idUSKCN19E159>.

Russia became the first regional power to publicly host the Taliban.⁴²

Russia used its relationship with the Taliban to spoil the peace process, ensuring that the United States lost not only the war, but also the political settlement it desperately sought to curate. Russia used financial and diplomatic assurances to convince traditionally anti-Taliban national leaders inside Afghanistan that the Taliban was no longer a threat.⁴³ This engagement turned some of the traditionally anti-Taliban forces in northern Afghanistan from US allies (as they were in 2001) to, at best, neutral actors in the fight against the Taliban and, at worst, potential stakeholders in a Taliban victory. As a result, the Taliban faced limited to no resistance when it swept northern Afghanistan in mid-2021.

Washington eventually struck a deal with the Taliban in 2020. The deal prompted numerous analyses, both optimistic and not, of the potential for this deal to bring peace.⁴⁴ From the perspectives of the analysts writing the NTA, the greatest downside of this deal was that it provided no credible assurance of easing tensions or the start of a peace process between Kabul and the insurgency. In their view, the Taliban was unlikely to follow through on any promises to partake in a peace process with the Islamic Republic, regardless of how doggedly the West kept up its end of the bargain. Evidence supporting this view emerged immediately: the Taliban continued attacking the Afghan military and Afghan civilians, although it began avoiding attacks on US forces.⁴⁵ Ultimately, intra-Afghan peace talks never materialized, and the Taliban won a military victory in August 2021.

Recommendations

Afghanistan can offer important lessons for Western states interested in promoting state-building, democratization, and development in weak allies in today's increasingly multipolar world.

Recommendation 1: Utilize diplomatic resources to help allies integrate into regional politics.

Diplomacy is “the currency of peace.”⁴⁶ Functional regional diplomatic relationships—even adversarial ones—are essential to establishing low-violence relationships between Western allies and nearby states. When diplomats can establish contact, they can facilitate negotiations that allow states to resolve issues with less reliance on the use of force. Diplomats then establish back channels, and these back channels pave the way to détente.⁴⁷ The fear that establishing active diplomatic relations with Western adversaries would alienate its patrons led the Islamic Republic down a path of regional isolation, which state officials eventually regretted. They learned too late the high costs of forgoing active diplomatic relationships with the most powerful states in their region.

The lesson for the West is that diplomatic support in service of regional engagement is at least as important as diplomatic support in service of domestic conflict resolution. During its time in Afghanistan, the West spent years trying to ease relations between Kabul and the Taliban. What it neglected, however, was the need to build relationships between Kabul and the powerful states in its region, including Russia, Iran, and China. By using its diplomatic resources to help allies integrate into their own regions, the West can create more sustainable security situations for its allies. It may even save some money on military aid if it can use diplomacy to reduce the regional security threats facing its allies.

42 Ibid

43 Petr Kozlov and Anna Rynda, “Afghan Crisis: Russia Plans for New Era with Taliban Rule,” BBC News, August 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58265934>.

44 Scott Worden, “Breaking the Stalemate: Biden Can Use the U.S.-Taliban Deal to Bring Peace,” United States Institute of Peace, February 25, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/02/breaking-stalemate-biden-can-use-us-taliban-deal-bring-peace>; John R. Allen, “The US-Taliban Peace Deal: A Road to Nowhere,” Brookings, March 5, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/05/the-us-taliban-peace-deal-a-road-to-nowhere/>.

45 “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan.”

46 Charles A. Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

47 Richard A. Moss, *Nixon's Back Channel to Moscow: Confidential Diplomacy and Détente*. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2017).

Recommendation 2: Select small, high-impact state-building projects instead of large, sweeping plans for state formation.

State-building is a slow and expensive process, and large state-building endeavors may take longer than voter resolve can hold steady. The United States and its allies learned this the hard way in Afghanistan. Over the course of two decades, Western voters tired of the economic and personal costs associated with the “forever wars” in the Middle East and South Asia. While twenty years is a long time for voters, it is a blip in the lifetime of a state.

The end goal of state formation is to create robust security institutions capable of maintaining internal and external security. In reference to the importance of security institutions, the famous political scientist Samuel Huntington once stated, “the most important political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government.”⁴⁸ In Afghanistan, Western allies were trying to give the country a sustainably peaceful “form of government”—democracy—in which opposing groups could settle differences without resorting to force. They were also trying to give the country a sustainable “degree of government,” which the democratically elected government could use to extricate the country from the vicious cycle of political violence, conflict, and authoritarianism. This was a massive undertaking that, while likely possible given a sufficiently long timeframe, proved impossible before voters grew disillusioned.

Small-scale state-building projects, such as training, can be completed before voters become disillusioned, and can make meaningful contributions to the quality of governance and security. The case of Afghanistan highlights the essential role of training in competency building. Training modules are flexible in form and cost, and have demonstrated high-impact potential. In Bangladesh, a customized training program made significant improvements to senior officials’ understanding and utilization of e-government systems.⁴⁹ In India, training programs targeting a random sample of police officers generated significant improvements in the quality of policing.⁵⁰

Programs such as these work best when they target deficiencies that are having major impacts on the quality of governance or security. Subject-matter experts should be used to identify target deficiencies, in order to ensure the most efficient and effective use of resources. Data analytics should also be used to provide concrete evidence of return on investment (ROI). Evidence of ROI will help sustain public support for expenditures and improve recipient states’ faith in the value of the support.

Recommendation 3: When providing weapons, software, or personnel support to allied states, the following are essential for imparting maximum value.

- Equipment must be easy for recipient states to repair and maintain.
- Software must be customized to meet the needs of the recipients.
- Contractors must not preclude recipient ownership of these resources.

Many parts to aircraft and other machinery provided to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan are readily replaceable when they malfunction in the West, but Afghanistan lacked the supply chains needed to reliably obtain replacement parts for Western-supplied machinery. Donating expensive equipment that becomes junk when components malfunction is neither fiscally responsible for the donating state nor a source of long-term security for the recipient.

Human-resources management systems like APPS have the potential to be enormously beneficial tools for state-xishowbuilding. In Afghanistan, a lack of training for state officials and customization of the software wasted its potential. In response to perceived Afghan incompetence, the West deployed contractors to administer the payroll system. This approach did not achieve full-scale APPS functionality—because of the lack of customization to the Afghan use case—nor did it provide Afghan officials with the training they needed to effectively leverage APPS in their fight against the

48 Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).

49 Shirley Gregor and Time Turner, “A ‘Sweet Spot’ Change Strategy for a Less Developed Country: Leveraging e-Government in Bangladesh,” *European Journal of Information Systems* 23, 2014, 655–671.

50 Abhijit V. Banerjee, et al., “Improving Police Performance in Rajasthan, India: Experimental Evidence on Incentives, Managerial Autonomy and Training,” National Bureau of Economic Research.

Taliban after the West withdrew. APPS also needed to be customized for Afghanistan's needs. The restrictive modules programmed into APPS doomed the system to fail, squandering significant Western investment in the system and undermining Kabul's ability to hold the line against the Taliban.

The presence of contractors in key positions throughout the Afghan government and military—specifically, in positions responsible for maintaining military equipment—set the government up to fail upon Western withdrawal. At least some portion of the budget spent on contractors should have been diverted to training focused on preparing Afghan officials to fill essential positions held by contractors.

Recommendation 4: Leverage allies' operational knowledge to make more informed decisions.

Washington deprived itself of Kabul's operational knowledge of the Taliban when it attempted mediation through unilateral talks with the Taliban.

Mediation works when conflicting parties want peace, but do not trust each other enough to move forward with the peace process.⁵¹ The practice of a third party promising concessions from its close partner, in exchange for cooperation from a mutual adversary, is called biased mediation.⁵² Biased mediators work through leverage; they use their special relationship with one of the conflict parties to deliver on costly concessions. This can have the effect of building trust between mistrustful warring parties.⁵³

Biased mediation is vulnerable to exploitation—an example of which is seen in how the Taliban responded to prisoner releases in 2019 and 2020. The United States promised several costly concessions to the Taliban on behalf of the Islamic Republic in the lead-up to its withdrawal, including the release of five thousand Taliban prisoners in exchange for Taliban promises to engage in peace talks with the Islamic Republic.⁵⁴ Upon release, most of those prisoners returned to fight

under the Taliban. The promised peace talks never materialized.

The United States' mistake in dealing with the Taliban was assuming that the group wanted peace. This turned out to be wishful thinking. At least during the period when Washington was open to peace—2010 to 2021—the Taliban did not want it. Instead of withholding peace talks out of fear of government reprisals after disarmament, the Taliban was withholding talks because it had no desire for peace. It preferred to fight until it either won or perished, rather than live peacefully in a democratic Afghanistan whose government was modeled after the West.

US diplomats and leaders could have caught this faulty assumption by working more closely with Afghan officials during their negotiations with the Taliban. Afghan officials were more deeply embedded in the operational context than US officials and, therefore, better positioned to intuit the Taliban's objectives. In late June 2021, US President Biden remarked to Afghan President Ghani that the odds of the Taliban "doing anything rational is not very high."⁵⁵ This fact, while self-evident to President Ghani's delegation, seemingly took the US government three years of unilateral peace negotiations to fully accept. Had Washington worked more closely with the Afghan government during the negotiations—rather than excluding it and proceeding unilaterally—it would have been able to leverage Afghan officials' knowledge of the Taliban in order to make more informed, and likely different, choices in the lead-up to its withdrawal.

51 Barbara Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," *International Organization* 51, 3, 1997, 335–364.

52 Isak Svensson, "Who Brings Which Peace? Neutral versus Biased Mediation and Institutional Peace Arrangements in Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, 3, 2009, 446–469.

53 Ibid.

54 "Afghan Assembly Approves Taliban Prisoner Release," BBC News, August 9, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53706638>; Mashal Mujib and Fatima Faizl, "Afghanistan to Release Last Taliban Prisoners, Removing Final Hurdle to Talks," *New York Times*, August 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/09/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-prisoners-peace-talks.html>.

55 Coll and Entous, "The Secret History of the U.S. Diplomatic Failure in Afghanistan."

Lessons from Afghanistan for Western State-Building in a Multipolar World

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