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**THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE U.S. MILITARY
WITHDRAWAL AND TALIBAN TAKEOVER IN AFGHANISTAN**

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Abstract:

This article aims to highlight the main gaps in the work of the institution responsible for maintaining peace and security on the international arena, especially in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. This paper tries to identify and analyze the impact of the U.S. military withdrawal and Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. The United States concluded a 20-year war in Afghanistan with the U.S. force withdrawing its last remaining soldiers in August, 2021. Furthermore, U.S. officials have reported that the Taliban are now in possession of the equipment paid with U.S. funds for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) such as ground vehicles, aircrafts, arms and ammunition. Much of the materials and equipment now belong to the Taliban forces but the exact quantity remains unknown. In addition, fleeing personnel of ANDSF took some arms, aircrafts and military equipment to neighboring countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Iran. Although the U.S. military equipment was rendered inoperable, being in the hands of the Taliban will reveal plenty of information on how the U.S. builds its weapons and how it uses them.

Keywords: Afghanistan, US, Taliban, military equipment, takeover

1. Introduction

The Taliban movement was formed in 1993-1994 of Afghan Muslim clerics and students. Many of them used to be anti-Soviet fighters - mujahideen - who had become discouraged with the civil war between different parties that erupted after the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the subsequent fall of the Soviet-backed government in 1992. Most of the members of the movement had studied seminaries in Pakistan and decided on the name Taliban (student of Islam) to separate themselves from mujahideen (Rashid, 2000). The Taliban movement was supported by Pakistan because of the potential of the group to bring order in Afghanistan and secure a cooperative ally, hence providing Pakistan with great security on one of the several borders for what they called strategic depth (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004). The beliefs of Taliban and practices were derived from the conservative tribal tradition of Pashtuns, who represent Afghanistan's complex ethnic makeup and who used to rule Afghanistan.

After the Soviet troops' withdrawal, the Taliban viewed government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani as anti-Pashtuns, corrupt and weak. From 1992 to 1996, civil war erupted between the mujahideen group leading to population's support for the Taliban as they were perceived as more able to deliver stability and less corrupt. According to Zalmay Khalilzad who later became an U.S. Specialist Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation stated that he liked many of the Taliban members and seemed optimistic regarding them at the beginning. In November 1994, the southern city of Kandahar was overrun by the Taliban and started a series of military campaigns throughout Afghanistan that culminated in the capture of Kabul in September 1996. As the Taliban imposed strict adherence to its interpretation of Islam, the group rapidly



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lost domestic and international support because they employed harsh punishments such as public executions and bans on Western music, dancing, and television to enforce its decree in areas it controlled. Taliban forbidden women working outside home unless for health care or attending school and publicly executed women for alleged adultery. Taliban drew international criticism in March 2001 for destroying massive sixth-century Buddha statues carved into hills because they considered them contrary to Islam and idolatrous.

The United States had played a crucial role in supporting anti-Soviet mujahideen. However, due to the withdrawal of Soviet troops after the 1988 Geneva Accords, the attention of the U.S. to Afghanistan declined. Thus, due to security reasons, since 1989 until 2001, the U.S. embassy in Kabul was evacuated. Although, the United States still assisted the mujahideen groups who continued to fight against the Soviet supported Afghan government which fell in 1992, there was little appetite to maintain U.S. engagement. By that time, in 1996, the Taliban took control of Kabul as the U.S. policy towards Afghanistan was unclear (Coll, 2005).

Growing international and U.S. popular attention to the difficult situation of the Afghan women combined with a renewed focus on human rights under Secretary of State Madeleine Albright led to U.S. policy shifting against the Taliban by 1997. This move occurred even though an U.S. partner Saudi Arabia – one of the three countries along with United Arab Emirates and Pakistan that recognized the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan - showed support for this group. The U.S. views of and the relations with the Taliban were mainly influenced by Taliban's decision to shelter Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. In 1996, bin Laden moved from Sudan to Afghanistan, where he had previously spent most of the 1980s as a high profile organizer of efforts to aid the mujahideen and financier. Pakistani Intelligence officers reportedly arranged the meeting between the Taliban leaders and bin Laden in Kandahar. As a result, bin Laden formed an alliance with the Taliban where he financed the group and provided military support for their efforts to complete their conquest of the country in exchange for safe haven for the Al Qaeda recruits and training camps. It has been estimated that over 10,000 Al Qaeda combatants may have trained at the Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan. In April 1998, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Bill Richardson visited Kabul and required Taliban to expel bin Laden. The Taliban group answered that they did not know his whereabouts and that bin Laden does not pose a threat to the United States. In August 1998, the threat posed by bin Laden became clearer when operatives from Al Qaeda simultaneously bombed U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya with casualties of over 200 people. In response, the U.S. launched cruise missile attacks on Al Qaeda targets in Afghanistan that proved to be unsuccessful in either persuading the Taliban to expel him or killing bin Laden. U.S. pressure on Pakistanis and Saudis to use their influence to convince the Taliban to expel bin Laden proved to be unsuccessful. Nonetheless, in July 1999, President Bill Clinton imposed sanctions on the Taliban. Those sanctions were equivalent to sanctions on governments deemed state sponsors of terror. Furthermore, in October 1999, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) added economic and travel sanctions against the Taliban with United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) that expanded the sanctions and included an arms embargo against the Taliban. However, Taliban leadership were not moved by any of the sanctions as the foundation was deep and personal (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004).

On 11th September 2001, Al Qaeda operatives directed a series of terrorist attacks on the United States soil that killed approximately 3,000 people. Shortly after, on 20th September 2001, President George W. Bush in a nationwide address before a joint session of Congress demanded



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that the Taliban hand over the Al Qaeda leaders, permanently close terrorist training camps and provide the United States with access to those camps. However, the Taliban leaders did not comply with any of the demands and stated bin Laden's status as their guest (Washington Post, 2001).

Waiting for an authorization to use military force (AUMF) enacted on 18th September 2001, the U.S. military action started on 7th October 2001, with airstrikes aimed at Taliban targets in every part of Afghanistan while having air support to anti-Taliban troops in the northern of the country. In less than two weeks, a limited number of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) paramilitary forces, U.S. Army Special Forces and some conventional ground troops began deploying in Afghanistan (Perry and Kassing, 2015). Shortly after, on 13rd November 2001, Kabul was evacuated by the Taliban which was soon retaken by the Afghan army. As the U.S. backed Afghan troops approached the birthplace of the Taliban movement, the group's leaders offered terms of surrender including an amnesty for the Taliban combatants who would lay down their arms. U.S. officials rejected such amnesty. Although many Taliban troopers were killed by U.S. or Afghan army, other managed to escape in rural areas of the country and then flee to Pakistan. Afghan delegates assembled in December 2001 in Germany, by the United Nations selected Hamid Karzai to perform duties as the head of an interim national Afghan government marking the start of the post-Taliban governance. No attempt has been made to include the Taliban in the talks and no members of the Taliban participated in the 2002 emergency consultative assembly that elected Karzai as president. The development and success of the new Afghan government represented the start of a crucial mission set for the U.S. forces and their international partners to help defend and assist the new government and its emerging military. In January 2002, Karzai attended the State of the Union address where President Bush stated that Afghanistan and United States were allies against terror and partners in rebuilding the country (White House, 2002). Congress assisted the Bush Administration in his approach, authorizing funds for more expansive for U.S. civilian assistance missions and military. In May 2003, U.S. officials announced an end to massive combat operations in Afghanistan, even though then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld added that there were still dangers in certain parts of the country (CNN, 2003).

By 2005, the Taliban combatants had already begun to regroup in the heartland of southern and eastern Afghanistan, Pashtun, as well as across the border in Pakistan where the Pakistan's security and intelligence services were tolerating or even supporting the Taliban according to many observers (Waldman, 2010). On the other hand, the Taliban described the military coalition operations between the Afghan government and U.S. as a military occupation since the group described the Afghan government and as being puppets for foreign powers (Calvin, 2012). The United States cautiously enlarged their forces to around 30.000 soldiers by the end of Bush Administration in response to growing Taliban activity. The United States and its partners, under the Obama Administration, increased even more the troops present in Afghanistan at approximately 130.000 soldiers in 2010-2011 with a set goal to end combat operations by the end of 2014. However, the increase of the U.S. and its allies' forces proved to be unsuccessful in weakening the Taliban advancement. The assessment of the Obama Administration was that the military means alone will not end the conflict (New York Times, 2012). Furthermore, negotiations between U.S. and Taliban could not be carried out since U.S. would have been forced to include the Afghan government with which the Taliban refused to meet in any settlement (The Guardian, 2010). NATO began to gradually transfer security duties



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to Afghan army starting in 2011 as international force levels were reduced in advance of the scheduled 2014 transition. As such, at the end of 2014, the Afghan army assumed full responsibility for security nationwide. Also, by the end of 2014, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) would end and on 1st January 2015, the start of a noncombat Resolute Support Mission (RSM) would begin. Additionally to advising, training, and assisting the Afghan army as part of RSM, U.S. forces in Afghanistan also conducted counterterrorism operation (CRS, 2021).

2. U.S. Military Withdrawal and Taliban Takeover

In January 2017, President Donald J. Trump came into office and pulled out approximately 11.000 U.S. soldiers from Afghanistan reducing the U.S. force within the region. Therefore, compared to the peak in 2009-2011, the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan have declined of approximately 100.000 soldiers (Lubold and Youssef, 2017). However, in June 2017, Secretary of Defense James Mattis delegated the authority to set force levels limited to 3.500 soldiers. In September 2017, Secretary Mattis signed orders to deploy 3.500 additional troops in Afghanistan (Copp, 2017). Upon arrival in the region, the additional troops were dedicated to RSM putting the number of U.S. forces between 14.000 to 15.000 by the end of 2017 (Washington Post, 2017). The lack of military progress against the Taliban frustrated President Trump and ordered negotiations between U.S. and Taliban without the Afghan government for the first time. Although the negotiations developed under Zalmay Khalilzad, President Trump carried on expressing disappointment with the mission of the U.S. military in Afghanistan and manifested the desire to withdraw the U.S. troops as quickly as they could (TOLOnews, 2009). According to the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, General Austin S. Miller, U.S. force level started to decrease by 2.000 soldiers to arrive at approximately 12.000 - 13.000 soldiers between 2018-2019 (New York Times, 2019).

In February 2020, the Taliban, and the United States signed a formal agreement. The United States committed to withdrawing all its non-diplomatic civilian personnel, contractor, and troops from Afghanistan. The military force would be pulled out of the region in two stages. More specifically, 8.600 soldiers would be removed from Afghanistan by mid-July 2020 and the complete withdrawal of the soldiers by April 2021. In return, the Taliban committed to prevent any groups similar and including Al Qaeda from threatening the United States and its partners by not allowing those groups to fundraise, reside or train in Afghanistan. The U.S. withdrawal commitment did not impose any conditions regarding the reduction of violence of the Taliban against Afghan government or taking any other action. The agreement between U.S. and Taliban without the Afghan government stated that up to 5.000 Taliban prisoners of the Taliban held by the Afghan government and by March 2020, up to 1.000 Afghan personnel to be released by the Taliban. According to the agreement, negotiations between the Afghan government and Taliban were also to start that month but they remained unscheduled for months due to disagreements over the prisoner release and political holdup in Kabul. However, on 12nd September 2021 in Doha, the Taliban and the Afghan government completed the prisoner release eliminating the key obstacle intra-Afghan negotiations (CRS, 2021).

Throughout 2020, U.S. officials stated that the Taliban were not in full compliance with the agreement (Reuters, 2020a) while the U.S. troops continued to decrease to 8.600 one month ahead to the mid-July 2020 deadline (CNN, 2020). In addition, according to President Trump in



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October 2020, the remaining numbers of the U.S. troops in Afghanistan, will be home by Christmas 2020 (Reuters, 2020b).

Then-Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller announced on 17th November 2020 that he will continue to reposition the U.S. forces from Afghanistan; however, 2,500 U.S. soldiers would still remain in the region by January 2021 (DoD, 2020). According to Secretary Miller on 15th January 2021, only 2500 U.S. soldiers remained in Afghanistan (DoD, 2021a).

On 20th January 2021, President Biden took office and stated on 16th March 2021 interview that the U.S. - Taliban agreement was not a very solid negotiated deal and meeting 1st May 2021 U.S. troops withdrawal deadline could happen but would be very tough. Furthermore, he also mentioned that an Administration review of the U.S. policy in Afghanistan was in process and reaching a decision would not take much longer (ABC News, 2021).

On 14th April 2021, President Biden stated that the complete withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan would begin on 1st May 2021 and be completed by 11th September 2021 (White House, 2021a). In a written response to this announcement, the Taliban accused the United States of breaching the February 2020 agreement and emphasized that the U.S. decision to remain after the 1st May 2021 would open the way for Taliban forces to take the necessary countermeasures and hold the American side responsible for all future action (Augengeradeaus, 2021). On 26th August 2021, the Afghan nationals together with the U.S. were killed in Kabul. The attacked was claimed by an affiliate of the Islamic States in Afghanistan that has been in conflict with the Taliban. Unfortunately, the Taliban failed to predict and prevent such attacks on any group in Afghanistan according to the U.S. - Taliban agreement (CRS, 2021).

According to the United States Institute of Peace, few observers mentioned that the Biden Administration could retained a small force in the region in order to facilitate an agreement between the Afghan groups breaching the U.S. - Taliban agreement. Contrary to this view, President Biden stated that the small number of the U.S. force would not have been sufficient to deter the Talian force and destroy the relationship even further (White House, 2021b). Still, others consider that it would not have been worth risking further lives and U.S. military resources for a minimal footprint in Afghanistan (Brookings, 2021). By June 2021, 44% of the U.S. troops have already been removed from Afghanistan according to the United States Central Command (CENTCOM). The majority of the U.S partners and NATO allies withdrew their soldiers by July 2021 (Military, 2021). On 8th July, President Biden declared that U.S. military mission in Afghanistan will end on 31st August. A fast Taliban advance, leading up to the taking of Kabul, and the emergency evacuation of the U.S. embassy personnel and some Afghan of Afghanistan, led to the United States deploying thousand additional soldiers to assist with the evacuation process (CRS, 2021).

3. Budget Implications

The most recent Department of Defense Cost of War quarterly report showed that from September 2001 to March 2021, DoD provided a total of \$837.3 billion in current dollars for the military operations such Operation Freedom’s Sentinel and Operation Enduring Freedom together with the reconstruction activities in Afghanistan. The report shows that the annual obligation – in current dollars – decreased to \$40 billion in FY2020 compared to its peak of \$98 billion in FY2012. The report from 2020 represents the last fiscal year for which data are available (SIGAR, 2021).



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According to the quarterly report of Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) to Congress, from October 2001 to June 2021, the Congress has appropriated approximately \$145 billion in current dollars to federal agencies from which the Department of Defense received \$83 billions for reconstructions and related activities in Afghanistan. More specifically, those \$83 billion were directed to Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (SIGAR, 2021). However, some nongovernment observers such as Brown University estimated on 15th April 2021 that the cost of war in Afghanistan exceeded the value provided by the Department of Defense to \$2.31 trillion. Additionally to the funding for overseas emergency military operations for the State Department and Department of Defense, the estimates include amounts for what it is pictured as other war related costs such as increases to the DoD budget, interest from the national debt of borrowing and medical care for the U.S. veterans who served in Afghanistan (Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, 2021).

The Afghan government together with the U.S. allies have received dispositioned U.S. military equipment and materials to assist with the advance of U.S. National security and foreign policy interest according to SIGAR in December 2020. As of 17th September 2021, Department of Defense did not publish a full public estimate of the amount of their personal property in Afghanistan. Much of the materials and equipment now belong to the Taliban forces but the exact quantity remains unknown (Reuters, 2021).

U.S. officials have reported that the Taliban are now in possession of the equipment paid with U.S. funds for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) such as ground vehicles, aircrafts, arms and ammunition. On 17th August 2021, the U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan declared that the U.S. does not have an obvious and complete picture of where every article of defense material has gone but he could confirm that a fair amount of U.S. materials and equipment has fallen in the hands of the Taliban (White House, 2021c). According to General Mark Milley on 18th August 2021, the U.S. government had unspecified abilities relevant to the U.S. equipment seized by the Taliban (Department of Defense, 2021b). In addition, fleeing personnel of ANDSF took some arms, aircrafts and military equipment to neighboring countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Iran. Although the U.S. military equipment was rendered inoperable, being in the hands of the Taliban will reveal plenty of information on how the U.S. builds its weapons and how it uses them. The ultimate winner of two decades of war is Afghanistan is most likely the most important and eager partner of the Taliban, China. Expect the Chinese military to use this opportunity to create a new generation of tactics and weapons tailored to the U.S. vulnerabilities against the U.S. military while exporting to its client states (DefenseOne, 2020).

4. Conclusion

The United States concluded a 20-year war in Afghanistan with the U.S. force withdrawing its last remaining soldiers and ending airlift of more than 120.000 civilians; however, leaving thousands of others stranded (Financial Times, 2021). Furthermore, U.S. officials have reported that the Taliban are now in possession of the equipment paid with U.S. funds for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) such as ground vehicles, aircrafts, arms and ammunition. According to Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, the costs of war in Afghanistan is greater than DoD's estimations at approximately \$2.26 trillion compared to \$837.3 billion. Furthermore, Department of Defense by did not publish a full public estimate of the amount of their personal property in Afghanistan. Much of the materials



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and equipment now belong to the Taliban forces but the exact quantity remains unknown. More specifically, the DoD report has yet to come out in order to see the damaged done by the Taliban to the U.S. military budget.

In addition, fleeing personnel of ANDSF took some arms, aircrafts and military equipment to neighboring countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Iran. Although the U.S. military equipment was rendered inoperable, being in the hands of the Taliban will reveal plenty of information on how the U.S. builds its weapons and how it uses them. The ultimate winner of two decades of war is Afghanistan is most likely the most important and eager partner of the Taliban, China. Expect the Chinese military to use this opportunity to create a new generation of tactics and weapons tailored to the U.S. vulnerabilities against the U.S. military while exporting to its client states. Whatever weaknesses the Chinese military will discover, will likely endanger the U.S. force in years to come.

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