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Why Did the Biggest U.S Democracy Project Fail in Afghanistan After 20 Years of War and Millions of Dollars Spent?

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Why Did the Biggest U.S. Democracy and Nation-Building Project Fail in
Afghanistan After 20 Years of War and Millions of Dollars Spent?

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Dedicating this project to my beloved mother to whom I owe everything and more.

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PREFACE

I don't recognize myself as the person I was just one year ago. I was then trapped in Kabul, Afghanistan - an American University of Afghanistan student surrounded by the chaos of a Taliban-occupied state. Today, I am in New York City, continuing my college education at Bard college. After the struggles of the past few weeks, however, I am forever changed since I left behind my family, who remain at grave risk, my home, my heritage - everything I hold dear.

My journey started with my brother, who had worked with the U.S. military and had obtained a special immigrant visa. The night Taliban occupied Kabul we got an email telling us to head to the airport I sat in the car with my family as terrible scenes unfolded outside the airport gates. They will always remain in my head: Taliban troops blocking what looked like thousands of families - women, children, and elderly - by beating them with gun handles and heavy sticks to push them away or shooting into the air or pointing guns directly at them. All the while, I sat in the car, holding my 6-year-old nephew, who seemed traumatized. I tried to console him. "No one can hurt you," I promised, "your uncle is not going to let anyone hurt you." On the inside, however, I was traumatized. I was scared for my life - wondering what would happen if they found out I studied at an American university or that my brother worked with the U.S. military.

The Taliban tried to shoot our driver. We were able to escape and drive to another gate controlled by U.S Marines. But there was a virtual moat - a drainage ditch filled with water from nearby bathrooms. On one side of the ditch were what looked like thousands of Afghan people pleading for help, on the other, the U.S marines. We needed to show them the scans of our special immigrant visa emails and my American University of

Afghanistan ID. It seemed our last hope, so I jumped into the ditch - the dirty water came up to my waist. But when I reached the U.S. marines and showed them our documents, they told me, "We ONLY help people with U.S. passports." I knew President Joe Biden had just told Americans that Washington will get its allies out.

Yet on the ground, though, the reality appeared far different. I just stayed in the drainage ditch, asking the marines for help. It seemed like forever but was probably roughly an hour later when one U.S. marine, smoking a cigarette nearby, asked to see the scan of my ID and passport on my iPhone. After looking at them, he suddenly pulled me out of the ditch - telling me he would help me. But, he added, if I tried to bring my family along, he would kick me back out. This was the start of my journey to the United States, I never even had a chance to say goodbye to my family, and my promise to my nephew remains unfulfilled.



Figure 1. Kabul Airport Gate (Source: Reuters, [Date]).

I spent that night sitting in a tent, suffocated among thousands. Like them. I was waiting to talk with a U.S. State Department official, who needed to examine all paperwork, passports, and visas, I knew all I had were the scans in my cell phone. All night, the fear of getting turned away built up, even as I worried about my phone battery dying. But the next morning, I had enough power left on my phone to show the U.S. official scans of my American university ID.

The Department of State officials put a wristband with a tag on me and told me I could get on a bus to the U.S. military planes flying out of Kabul. The next thing I knew, I was aboard a giant Boeing C-17 military plane with roughly 500 to 600 other people. Like me, they were sitting on the floor. I had no idea where I was headed - but it was out of Afghanistan. The flight was four hours, and then no one could deplane for another two. People were fainting in the hot, airless plane as we waited for busses to take us to military hangers. Below is a picture I took from inside the military Plane.



Figure 2. Inside of the military plane (own photo).

When I finally got off, the first thing I asked was: “Where am I?” That’s when I learned I was in Qatar. We were bused to a hangar filled with hundreds of Afghan evacuees. I quickly found out that many had already spent six or seven days there.

Again, I was told only people with U.S. passports could depart. I heard the wait would be for hours, days, perhaps weeks. The uncertainty, the unknown was daunting. I am the youngest member of my family. Imagine being always protected, always looked after- then, in the blink of an eye, you lose everything you know: your family, your home, your cat, your room, everything. You do not even know what is going to happen next. Inside the hanger, I was given only a bottle of water. Food was provided to families, and I was alone. That was the moment I broke down - I thought about my mom and my family,

and the life I would never have again. I cried for more than an hour. In the next pages I have some pictures from my journey and the places I stayed.



Figure 4 Kabul city downtown (own photo)



Figure 5 Qatar military camp (own photo)

Later, I heard a marine calling for someone who could speak English - to help with an emergency patient - and I offered to help. I served as an interpreter for about an hour. After, I saw that some people were being taken to buses and the marines told me to join the queue since I helped them. As I got on, I was handed a boarding pass for a flight to Ramstein, Germany.

When we arrived at the Ramstein airbase military camp, U.S marines took us to tents to check our paperwork and complete the biometric scans. The fear of being turned away almost overwhelmed me. They took me through my biometrics, Again, I offered to help interpret for U.S marines - which I did for most of that night. Later, we were assigned tents, there were more than a hundred spaced-out tents around the hangers. Families were given tents inside the hangers; single travelers, like myself, were placed in tents back, far outside the hanger. My tent number was 97. This meant people in all the other 96 tents had priority for food, washroom rights, and flights out. Because I had been interpreting, and I got to my assigned tent very late. There was no light or electricity inside. I used my water bottle as a pillow. But I didn't feel safe. I had never traveled out



Figure 6 Military camp Germany (own photo)

of my hometown, other men assigned to that tent spoke another language; Pashto, which is a different Afghan language. Below is a picture of the tent I was assigned in Germany.

They quickly started picking on me because I could speak English but not their language. They taunted me -- saying it was shameful that I am an Afghan, but I cannot speak fluent Pashto (I speak Dari, the national language in Afghanistan but not for those Pashtuns in my tent). The next morning, I decided that I would not sleep - or even stay in that tent. I grabbed a blanket and went up to the front operational tent, where the US Marine troops were stationed. I sat there, wrapping the blanket around myself because I did not want to miss any opportunity to get on a flight. Meanwhile, I talked to the marines, asking them about their life. I also helped them with interpreting whenever they needed it. I soon figured out what life held in for me at the base. It was heartbreaking to see the condition of my countrymen. Some families had been there for more than 10 days yet were still unsure what awaited them. At each meal, hundreds of people lined up for food, often waiting five to six hours.

I wanted to use the restrooms but when I opened the door, I almost threw up, because of the filth, smell, and dirt. Imagine just the worst - and double it. I decided not to eat or drink anything because there was no way I could stay clean if I used those restrooms. It started to rain the second night, but I decided it was better to stay outside, near the marines than to go back to my tent. By the morning I was shaking with a terrible fever and could hardly walk. One marine gave me a meal bar and an ice pack. But I still sat there, waiting, forcing myself not to sleep for two more days.

Then, late on the third night, I heard an announcement that people should get in a queue, so I got in the line. When I reached the front, the U.S. troops asked me for paperwork., "I am an American university student!" assured them - because it was true, I

was a student at the American University of Afghanistan, "I do not have any paperwork. All I have is my university ID on my phone.

Again, fate helped me for whatever reason - maybe because I spoke fluent English, or maybe because I had been chatting with them every day, the marines allowed me to speak with the State Department officials, who handled the next step of screening. The officials took a photo of me and put another wristband on my wrist. That wristband, like the other, made me feel I was just an object to be moved - not valued as a human being. Then I was taken by bus to board a commercial flight to Washington. On the plane, I immediately checked to see if I could use my phone to connect to the WIFI. I could, and I was thrilled that I was finally able to text my family in Kabul that I was alive and well.

When we landed at the Washington airport, I was again questioned by an officer for proof of identification and passport. They looked at my scanned university ID and my passport scanned on my phone. Then I got a covid test - which was negative. Luckily, I also had a photo of my covid vaccination from the American University of Afghanistan. I showed that to them as well. Then I told them that I felt mentally tortured at the military camps, and I could not go to another one. They told me then if I was vaccinated and had family in the United States, I could call them to pick me up from the airport.

I had a friend in Virginia, I called them, and they told me that their family lived only 30 mins from the airport, and they would come to pick me up. I spent that night at their home, it all felt unreal after a week of such extreme mental and physical anxiety; I was able to take a shower for the first time in a week. It took me more than two hours to feel clean. I ate homemade French fries, which felt like a virtual feast and slept on a

comfortable bed. The next day, my cousin came to pick me up from Virginia and take me to their place in New York. I remembered that I recently took an online class as part of the Open Society University Network with Bard College. I immediately emailed a professor, explaining that I am now in New York, with only my phone. She connected me with two Bard college administrators who helped get me enrolled.

Now, I am writing this piece from my Bard dorm room. The adrenaline rush from my escape is slowing down. I have started feeling crippling, terrible, and guilty for being here - knowing that I left behind all my family and friends. However, knowing that I was a threat to their lives if I lived back home calms me down. Thoughts of my academic achievements and hard work have turned to dust. It breaks my heart. I feel helpless and uncertain about what the future holds. How am I going to overcome the challenges ahead to help myself - and my family back home? There are so many questions - but few answers, and little hope. Freedom of speech, democracy, the inclusion of women in the social and political sphere, free media, and many more promises were made by the international community, particularly by the United States. All these promises were disregarded and remain unfulfilled to date after the withdrawal of the United States on September 2021.

INTRODUCTION

Today women in Afghanistan are not allowed to work, go to school, or leave their households without male company. Music is banned, media is censored, and basically, the country went backward for decades. What makes this issue more devastating is the now lost achievements of democratic values throughout 20 years of US in occupation of Afghanistan. Millions of dollars of investment, dreams, and promises made for democracy, all vanished overnight on August 15th, 2021, as the Taliban took over Kabul. The reason I mention this overarching vision which failed is that this is not only my story this is the story of thousands of other Afghans now living under poverty, starvation, and a terrorist government in power.

The depth in this issue roots deep into the country's domestic politics, foreign policy, the policy with the US in particular, and the money spent. I will dig deeper into each one of these issues since they play key roles in terms of the great failure of this major democracy project. This I believe comes from a wrong understanding of Afghanistan. This wrong understanding starts in Kabul the capital of Afghanistan. I believe the west failed to understand that Kabul is not all Afghanistan. Instead, the west understood Afghanistan as a monolith of Kabul. They did not understand the nuances, ethnicities, diversity, culture, norms, and history of the country before implementing this major democratic project. To Understand this better we can imagine two pictures of Afghanistan: Kabul vs the rest of Afghanistan.

The war in Afghanistan is one of the most expensive wars in the history of American wars fought in other countries arguably. Almost \$1 trillion of the money belongs to the taxpayers. This longest war in the history of America ended with the

Taliban's takeover. This marks almost half a year that Afghan girls are not allowed to attend school. The governmental institutions in the country have collapsed, starvation is rising, poverty is at its highest peak, and Women are not allowed to work or leave their houses. The main question is what brings us to this day where all the achievements of Afghans are lost after the Taliban's takeover? What led to this event? Afghanistan right now is the center of attention around the world every country is focused on Afghanistan not becoming a haven for terrorism again but how is that possible with having a terrorist group currently governing the country? That seems very unrealistic. This brings us to even analyze the impact of American foreign policy towards Afghanistan and how their political potential has been weakened afterward.

The fact that numerous other pieces of research and studies have been conducted on Afghanistan over the course of the United States' involvement in that country is very obvious. However, what distinguishes this research paper from the others is the relevance of the topic, both in terms of the rapid collapse of the Republic Government of Afghanistan and the United States' position in the global power hierarchy in light of the apparent rise of China. The fact that this study will use a mixed research approach, which will start with a combination of qualitative and quantitative data, is what distinguishes it from other similar studies.

Taking this approach will assist in our understanding of how complex this matter is. In the first stage, we will examine the extensive research that has been conducted on this matter, both in recent times and in the past, to help us in better comprehending the context of this issue. The second phase will consist of some of the data collected from recent interviews as well as my personal experiences as someone who grew up during

this occupation and also witnessed it fail firsthand. In addition, this phase will include some element of oral history to assist in bringing the voices of locals to the surface for the purposes of raising awareness. In the third part, we will examine the findings of our research as well as the data collected, as well as conduct a literature review pertaining to this subject and make some comparisons to other democratic cases like Germany and Japan.

In the section of this paper devoted to the literature review, we will discuss the studies, publications, and reports that are relevant to our research issue. This will ensure that our study is based on a wide variety of sources, both academic and otherwise. This is due to the fact that we will also be including various government papers and policies that had an important influence during the entirety of this project.

It is helpful to have both the perspectives of the local Afghan population and the perspectives of the government officials or policy makers while approaching this problem from this angle. The analysis of this topic is another key element of this research, and in order to keep it free of any personal prejudice that might have arisen as a result of myself having gone through this experience, therefore having the comparison approach with other countries will be helpful to keep our research free of any possible bias.

By the end of reading this paper I expect the reader to have a prospective and conceptual knowledge about the history of this conflict, the actors, interactions of Afghan and American policy makers, overview of this project, and the elements which led to its failure. The research will also be adherent and mindful to the laws and regulations along with obtaining neutrality to be able to have the most accurate outcome for the reader. This nuanced research method will help and add up to the current existing literature about

the Afghan conflict and will be a good overview of the causes for the future academia and policy makers in Afghanistan. Not only that, but the research will also help to record the incidents which happened and the key players which will bring more accountability and transparency to people around the world specially Afghans.

Research limitations and complexities:

It is always important to address the shortcomings and complexities of research and this paper is no different and the arguments and analysis come with their limitations. To begin, the freshness and how recent of an incident this is makes it hard to find resources since there has not been along time that US withdrew and the Afghan government fell to the Taliban. Second is the shortage of inside voices from Afghanistan, this is because ever since the Taliban came to power one of their major agendas has been banning, filtering and censorship of free media both domestically and internationally which gives us little to work with what is really happening on a day-to-day basis in Afghanistan.

It is also important to highlight the fact that this is an experience that I have lived through it and that has been also part of the methodology to write this paper. The reason why I choose to share my story is for various reasons but mainly it helps have a perspective regarding the loss of human capital and loss of the future generations, even leaders of Afghanistan. On the other hand, I was born right after the US intervention, and I grew up in a city with the most exposure to democratic values. This shows although this was a failed project but for what it is worth it helped or motivated Afghans to educate and have an element of hope for how the future of the country might look like after decades of war. Therefore, my personal experience and story will help to not only give

prospective to this catastrophe but also give answers and analysis to our research question.

BACKGROUND

To begin, it all started after the attacks of 9/11 which led to the killing of thousands of Americans. As the attacks were planned by Osama Bin Laden who at that time was in Afghanistan. Per the “Pashtunwali” code, which is a code of conduct for Pashtuns to be hospitable to their guests the Taliban decided not to hand over Bin Laden to the U.S. government. This led to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan on October 7 of 2001. This is why we will start to analyze and focus on the impact of the U.S. foreign policy on Afghanistan and also how this biggest democratic project failed after 20 years of war and millions of foreign aids spent.

Women’s rights, state building, security reforms, economic development, poverty, and education were the areas that were the center of attention when Afghanistan was invaded. At the time no governmental infrastructure was functioning, there was no national army, no police, and no constitution. It was after the interim government that the flow of money from Europe, especially NATO countries started to flow into the country. NGOs were established, and aid was managed through various privately owned organizations. Yet, despite the efforts for 20 years to create a democratic government in Afghanistan this huge project failed and today Taliban are ruling over the country where no signs of democracy can be traced in Afghanistan.

CAUSES

The biggest investment of the U.S. government was in the national army of Afghanistan therefore we will start our analysis from there. Since this was a project from scratch the amount of money spent was huge. According to Joel Brinkley, since 2002 more than \$100 billion dollars of funds were spent in Afghanistan. A big portion of this money was budgeted on paper for the Afghan national army to function (Brinkley, 2012). This brings us to argue that if this much money was spent in Afghanistan for more than two decades why the national army did not even fight the Taliban for a day on August 15, 2021? The answer is simple the money was not spent on the army directly, it was “managed” through the NGOs which were owned by the Jihadi leaders and corrupt politicians.

According to the Washington Post in a report by Craig Whitlock, more than half of the money from foreign aid was spent either on the security protocol of these Jihadi leaders or the money was used to build mansions referred to as “poppy palaces” by locals. Hamid Karzai who was the president of Afghanistan after the invasion for two terms admitted that the CIA had delivered bags of cash to his office for years and it was not something unusual - quoted by the Washington Post (Craig, 2019 n.d.). This was tolerated by the United States government because the corrupt perpetrators were simply US allies. Therefore, on paper, the Afghan government claimed that they have an army of three hundred and fifty thousand fighters. “Where in reality they did not even have men close to a hundred thousand,” said Mohib, the former national security adviser in his interview with Oxford Union (Oxford Union, 2022). This meant that the money sent to

the country to empower the security sector and build an army went to the pockets of the corrupt leaders.

The media had an important role in terms of controlling public opinion and how the war was fought by the Afghan National Army. Many reports of Tolo news which is the prominent TV channel for Afghanistan would provide statistics on the progress of the Taliban across the country, corruption of the current government, and handovers of provincial capitals to the Taliban. This made the morale of the army collapse since they knew they are fighting a war which is already lost, also said Mohib in his interview with Oxford Union (Oxford Union, 2022). Mohib added that the United States told the Afghan Republic Government that the future government should be called a non-monopoly government while transferring power to the Taliban. Which meant giving absolute power to the Taliban, which led to demoralizing the Afghan national army on the battlefield.

On the other hand, President Mohamad Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai fired many of his army officials and provincial leaders because he feared that they were disloyal days before the collapse of his government, Reuters reports (Reuters, 2021). This meant a change in terms of how the national army was managed right at the heart of a stark war. This led to provincial governors making deals behind closed doors with the Talib leaders and surrendering themselves, giving the Taliban more victory on the battlefield.

One might ask how is this related to U.S. foreign policy. The answer is very simple since I have lived all my life amidst this war. I have witnessed how the United States dictated to the Afghan government throughout major political appointments or policy decisions. This meant, the American foreign policy even shaped how domestic affairs in state institutions functioned in Afghanistan. Since the country was heavily

dependent on aid from the US government, they had little say in how American policy makers interfered in their domestic and foreign politics. A major example of American domination over the Afghan government was the Doha agreement. On the 29th of February 2020 after negotiating with the Taliban for a long time, the United States signed an agreement with the Taliban to end the American war and bring “peace” to Afghanistan (Reuter, 2021).

The agreement itself was another sign of weakening the current Afghan government since they were not considered to be part of the agreement. This agreement came with its conditions starting with the withdrawal of the American troops from Afghanistan, not using Afghan soil against the United States, the release of the Taliban prisoners, and starting the intra-Afghan negotiations to shape the future government. Most of the commitments of this agreement remain unfulfilled from the Taliban’s side to date. This is because there was not a solid mechanism to measure the success of this agreement to monitor if the conditions are met. One might argue this agreement was another nail in the coffin for the Afghan Republic Government. A major clause of this agreement was to prohibit any offensive attacks against the Taliban in 2021. Where in return they promised that the Taliban will not attack big cities. As usual, the Taliban did not abide by the agreement and started more offensive attacks. Hence, this policy backfired confusing the war efforts and the Taliban captured more territory in return. The agreement plays a vital role since we see the biggest advocate of democracy the United States negotiating and recognizing a terrorist group that helped plan and execute the 9/11 attacks, (Semple, 2012, p.49).

Mismanagement of the army was also another major issue since the Afghan cabinet was solely based on the choices of the U.S. government. Hamdullah Mohib who has no military background was hired as the national security adviser of the president. Which in itself hurt the morale of generals and people who were experienced in the military and knew the fine lines of the Afghan war for decades. Altogether, this led to the national army catastrophe in Afghanistan during their most important war.

Similarly, gender and women's rights have been a major part of this democracy project. Various campaigns and policies were focused on involving Afghan women in the work sphere and politics. A great amount of money and other resources were spent but the result was very symbolic. The campaigns for gender equality were just a means for the people in power to access international aid. These campaigns surrounded and only had exposure in a few big cities including the capital Kabul. However, the majority of women lived in rural areas under similar suppression as the Taliban's regime given the conservative demographics. Sarah Bush argues that the quotas were accessible and promoted to "elite women" referring to the ones who lived in the cities where women in the rural areas were completely unaware of the quotas (Bush, 2016).

This means the demographics of the country were disregarded by the countries which used to provide aid. Afghan culture at its roots is very patriarchal, and male dominance has long been part of the Afghan culture. This means the policy to have a rapid modernization of Afghan women was problematic and short-lived, it was not an incremental and sustainable solution.

Although, some people argue that in media there was significant progress made in the representation of women and there were women journalists and TV anchors. Where in

reality there is less debate that all these TV channels and women anchors belong to the capital Kabul and Kabul is just a small city not all of Afghanistan. Hence, women experience war in Afghanistan differently than men since they live in a gender-based intersection. Major Afghan women's issues were either sidelined or did not get enough attention due to this war and living in rural areas. Indeed, the goal of the foreign donors for Afghanistan was to see more participation from Afghan women but there is minimal focus on more important issues like access to food, education, shelter, and prevention of domestic violence, rape, and forced marriages. This means media appearance and quotas in parliament, or the workplace was like a band-aid in a big wound for Afghan women (Burde & Linden, 2013).

Hence, only a certain percentage of Afghan girls who lived in Kabul were allowed to attend school. Most schools and teachers did not even exist in the rural areas, but they were part of the government's payroll. This was due to the high levels of corruption throughout the country. According to the Independent Human Rights Commission of Afghanistan weak governance, lack of audits, and limited transparency in tracking aid money and evaluation made room for embezzlement (Independent Human Rights Commission of Afghanistan, 2018). The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) also reported that due to the embezzlement of educational funds, there has been a major decline in girls' education in Afghanistan. Therefore, public awareness about women's rights across Afghanistan was the same as in the Taliban's era since the conservative societal mindset, corruption, and lack of accountability made it almost impossible in rural areas of the country (United Nations Development Program, 2018).

At the same time this was a plus point for the Taliban since their way of governance was more acceptable in the rural areas. This is because the Taliban promoted their laws and regulation to be Quranic, accessible, and less time-consuming. This made the rule of law weaker for the republic government which was backed by the funds sent through the U.S. government. Another factor that I believed had an important role in gender equality in Afghanistan was Islam.

According to Thomas Barfield, ninety-seven to ninety-nine percent of the Afghan population are Muslims. Ironically, this means the extreme viewpoints of Islam in terms of education, clothes, and participation in society, are dominant across the country regarding women. As a result, the campaign for gender equality, and participation of women by the U.S. government was a failure (Hanifi, 2011).

Rapid change of policy from the United States is another aspect of our argument which led to the failure of this democratic project. American foreign policy changes towards Afghanistan throughout different administrations in the US led to confusion on the ground for the Afghan military and also demoralized them.

Based on their foreign policies and approach toward Afghanistan, Obama and Bush administrations made Afghanistan heavily dependent on foreign aid. The country was never focused on internalization of the resources. Where Donald Trump started to withdraw from Afghanistan and lowered the aid, and Biden completely abandoned the country following the footsteps of Donald Trump. With the withdrawal of foreign forces and the decline of foreign aid, the country was not able to recover. This means if the foreign policy of the US was more focused on enriching the internal resources of the country along with aligning to the Afghan culture and religion the country would have

been in a different situation today. Afghanistan would have been able to survive economically, starvation would not have happened in rural areas, and the sudden collapse of the government might have been avoided. This policy change and change of administrations and leadership opened the room for corruption. There are many references and conjectures about corruption in the former Afghan government on a leadership level, whereas on the other hand equally the contractors from the US government who used to work for Afghanistan, were also equally corrupt (Brinkley, 2012).

The procurement system was responsible for the Afghan contracts which mainly focused on making the rich wealthier instead of providing the army with proper ammunition. As a result, during the very last days of the Afghan government, which was led by Ashraf Ghani, there was only one laser navigator missile in the whole country. This is because the United States had declined its aid to Afghanistan in half, which was like pulling out the plug and shutting down the country. One can also argue that this was done to prepare for a bigger war which was against Russia in Ukraine.

It could also be that Biden Administration wanted to decrease the cost of the war in Afghanistan. Now with the war in Ukraine, the attention of the world is mainly focused on Europe where Afghanistan is sidelined, therefore since the competition with Russia is more important, they wanted the policy to focus more on Ukraine and have their hands off approach towards Afghanistan.

Therefore, the impact of the United States' foreign policy was not only limited to the politics of Afghanistan but their economy, nation building in general and a lot more. Yet, one can not only hold the U.S. government responsible for the collapse of the

Afghan republic. There were factors inside the Afghan government like corruption, political divisions, culture, poverty, and elitism which made things more complicated. Gender inequality is still a prominent issue in Afghanistan where the little freedom that women used to enjoy in the capital Kabul is also being taken from them. The recent announcement of the Taliban about mandatory Hijab women are not allowed to enter governmental or educational institutions wearing a headscarf. They are forced to wear the Burqa and completely cover their faces.

There is still a window of hope open for Afghans because none of the countries around the world have recognized the Emirate of Taliban as the official government in Afghanistan. This means through providing aid and limiting their power the international community can still help Afghan people live a better life. In any of the scenarios, it is not the leaders and the politicians, but it is the common people who are affected. More than a million children in Afghanistan are now starving according to World Food Program (World Food Program, 2022). More than five million people have been displaced and thousands have been killed throughout the 20 years in Afghanistan for the sake of a war that they never choose to be a part of.

The concept of power and realism has long been a prominent aspect of the international system and how countries interact with one another. Kenneth Waltz argues that there is no world government hence anarchy would best describe how states mostly interact in the international system. Where this concept seems the opposite of what great powers like the United States believe in. In 2003 in his piece, James Chace highlights this concept in detail; the Bush administration's ambition to be the savior for countries affected by the enemies of freedom. This meant embracing a world under the American

direction. This meant the shift towards a unipolar world. Yet this was back in the early 2000s. (Lechner, 2017)

Today, things have changed, the world has been making progress and the United States has been stuck in this concept to be the savior of other countries. In 2023 the United States is a chair around the table with great power, but not the only one. Even if this move was consistent with American foreign policy to be the savior it might have resulted in fruitful outcomes in countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet the rapid change in their approach and unawareness of the complexities in such nations dwindled the effectiveness of their democracy project. This means that the approach to promoting democracy was through a very narrow lens, one can also call it provincialism. (Chace, 2003)

This shift can be seen clearly in the same piece by Chase, comparing national security strategies. To be precise, pre-and post-9/11, it was not America's concern how middle eastern/third-world countries like Afghanistan dealt with their adversities. Where matters took a completely different turn after 9/11 and national interest was separated from moralistic norms based on my perspective.

In a nutshell, the realist views and values of the states can change overnight based on their interest and national security status quo. Condoleezza Rice national security advisor to the Bush administration can be a good example of transient American politics. From writing and critiquing Clinton over focusing on "unimportant countries," post 9/11 she tells Lemann that "unhappy and unfortunate residents" of dictatorships should not be left alone and democracy is the only solution for them to get more modernized and have relationships with other human beings. (Chace, 2003)

NATION BUILDING

One might ask why build nations? Based on my perspective the question should be why build democratic nations? But first to answer that question one might have to look historically. How events occurring in third world countries can have larger devastating consequences in developed nations. (Miller, 2011) For instance, 9/11, viral diseases, weakening rule of law, and eventually distrusting the system in place. Not only that, but foreign aid is also another aspect of dealing with developing countries, their dependency, and another responsibility for the developed countries. (Miller, 2011)

This means that building nations is important and will work and also on the side can have somewhat positive results as a byproduct. Today after the Afghan government collapsed and the democratic project failed after 20 years of war and investment, globally Afghan youth are raising their voice advocating for the issue. This youth can be that byproduct we are referring to during the 20 years of American intervention. This means the goal was not wrong, it was rather the approach and the way it was handled.

One of the main arguments that arise most of the time when it comes to American democracy promotion is instrumentalization. To explain more, was this the goal to “liberate” Iraq or Afghanistan, or was this imperialism through democracy? Omar Guillermo Encarnacion explains this in detail. He starts by comparing the approach and foreign policy of the Bush administration with Woodrow Wilson's based on the United States' national security (Encarnación, 2005). Morality is a concept often discussed in the international system when it comes to promoting democracy and yet based on Wilsonian and Bush's approach this line of morality seems to blur when it comes to the national

interest. The shift in interest become more evident after 9/11 and the democratization of the Muslim world, especially the Arab world.

This meant that American power and influence should not only be cut down to military and defense but also ideologically it should be universal. Encarnacion mentions the role of Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz in this regard. He mentions that post 9/11 the focus was based on foreign policy and military and how to fight ideologies. This is a major point; this is because fighting ideologies is way harder than military intervention (Encarnación, 2005).

Similarly, the use of democracy to gain political gains is also another aspect that has made democracy hard to impose in countries like Afghanistan and the Middle East. For instance, the concept has now become more of a matter of perspective and how you define it which has made it easier to be a tool to gain public trust, power, order, peace, and connection. This means this concept of democratic imperialization started back with Wilson in Latin America, where he believed that democracy is a universal value capable of succeeding everywhere. (Encarnación, 2005) This explains one of the reasons that the project had more failures than successes the approach was more singular and was believed it would work everywhere the same way. What makes it problematic is the fact that factors other than the military are disregarded. For instance, domestic cultural barriers and norms.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER CASES

In many cases, people tend to argue that the promotion of this project was successful in Japan and Germany post world war compared to Iraq or Afghanistan. Where in reality these cases are not even comparable. Eva Bellin explains this very well starting with the economic aspect, explaining how even before the intervention to promote democracy Japan and Germany were great powers economically, and that was not the case for Iraq or Afghanistan (Bellin, 2004). To explain, this has to do more with post-war recovery and economic development of a country, where Germany and Japan are considered to be highly industrialized countries compared to Iraq or Afghanistan. They had the human and social capital to build on to and use foreign aid efficiently. Foreign aid everywhere in the world is a sensitive issue that I believe needs to be researched and talked about more.

In third-world countries like Afghanistan and Iraq, this topic is more complicated since they do not have the social, economic, and human capital to use foreign aid effectively in comparison to Japan and Germany. This means building democracy from scratch along with nation-building, which of course will take decades. Not only that, national identity and social solidarity are other aspects that are lacking in Iraq and Afghan cases. In the Iraqi case, it is more of a religious divide between Shia, Sunni, and the rest; where in Afghanistan along with religion a bigger part of the social and national identity divide is ethnic conflicts and diversity throughout the country (Bellin, 2004).

This meant a sense of national identity was lacking in Afghanistan at the time the military intervention happened and there hasn't been an active effort to bring the country together. Therefore, the lack of ethnic homogeneity was another barrier in terms of

having a national identity in Afghanistan. Importantly compared to Japan and Germany the country was lacking indigenous Afghan leaders to lead the process which led to the creation of a trust deficiency between the country's leaders and locals.

This meant rather than promoting local multi-ethnic governance, leaders were the U.S. political appointees starting from the president to the ministers of Afghanistan. This category of people was most privileged with high salaries and corruption money from foreign aid. With the rich and political elites taking advantage of aid economic goods were not delivered to people to endorse democracy as a means of prosperity, making it harder to fusion with society. In a nutshell, Japan and Germany had crucial political institutions, practices, and familiarity with democratic practices before being introduced to live under a democratic leadership whereas, in Afghanistan and Iraq, it wasn't the case. (Bellin, 2004)

DEMOCRATIZATION THROUGH FORCE

Democracy; people's government, from people, for people. Democracy has long been the preferred method of governance in societies, which is exercised through people's representatives. While globally it is regarded as the most effective way to run governments, yet how it is practiced and merged into societies remains a challenge. Especially in countries where dictatorship, corruption, suppression, and violence are prevalent. For instance, states that are facing this challenge include Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Policy makers and politicians has long believed that military intervention in such countries is a practical strategy to protect or implement democracy. Yet this is a difficult and layered approach and has many challenges, views, and ethical concerns.

Many advocates for using armed forces as a mean to promote democracy argue that it can have various positive outcomes. Military intervention can help overthrow dictatorships and substitute that with an opportunity for societies to establish democratic governance. "The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution" said President George W. bush (Dorff, 2005, p. 53). Another aspect of this standpoint is promoting democratic values in regions affected by conflicts. This means free speech, women's rights, education, human rights, etc. Samantha Power former U.S ambassador to the United Nations argues that in order to prevent mass atrocities and genocides military intervention is a justified approach to be taken. She further states that "America cannot and should not police the world, but...when innocent life is being taken in such scale, and we have the power to stop it, we have a moral obligation to try" (Bellamy, 2011, p.186).

On the other hand, there are many critics to this approach in order to promote democracy through military force and one of the most relevant one is the issue of legitimacy. This is because military intervention is part of violating the current sovereignty of occupied states, not only that most of the times military interventions do not have international recognition either. Hence, this issue can question the democratic transition of power and demoralize the locals for foreign intervention. As Bacevich argues (2011) “Military power used promiscuously can foster anti Americanism, erode the rule of law, and contribute to spread of disorder” (p.15).

Similarly, another challenge which is relevant to the conflict in Afghanistan is “The unintended consequences of intervention”. This comes in many forms starting with intensified violence, instability, more bloodshed, and prolonged conflict. Packer (2017) takes Iraq as a major example for being affected the most with unintended consequences which led to more complexities into the conflict. This can also be linked to the conflict in Afghanistan, since the reason for intervention was to battle terrorism and kill Osama Bin Laden, yet the war lasted for almost twenty years.

Morality is another topic where many arguments arise when it comes to using force as a mean to democratize. Although many advocates of military intervention argue that when it comes to moral responsibility then force can be justified to prevent human rights abuse, or to liberate autocracies. However, concerns regarding ethical use of force remain prevalent since it can violate and intervene not only militarily but also into the internal affairs of states. This is because outside force is used to promote democracy and it can be perceived as colonial power or “Democratic Imperialism” therefore making military intervention inherently flawed. Yet the promotion of democracy through military

force is complex and layered strategy and it is hard for both critics and proponents to come to consensus in about this topic.

UNDER WHICH CONDITION WILL REGIME CHANGE WORK

Analysis of regime change through the lens of hard power is an important part of this topic. We understand that in international relations there are various tools through which a regime change can take place. Which includes, diplomacy, political and economic sanctions, and military interventions. Since we are discussing regime change with force, Hard power is an important aspect of this topic. Military force is one of the most powerful tools in international system to change the behavior of states. As Condoleezza Rice argues in our world power matters; and hard power is matters much more than what we might like (Rice, 2008). Rice argues that hard power is essential and can be useful in societies where diplomacy and nonmilitary means fail. As she stated that “diplomacy without leverage is just talking” (Rice, 2005). She believes that military and economic pressure are great tools to achieve desired outcomes.

Yet when it comes to Iraq and Afghanistan, which are the two major examples of regime change through hard power the results are far from success. This brings us to argue that using force as a source of regime change cannot bring desired outcomes, unless it is followed by a post conflict reconstruction plan and diplomacy. Rice is also aware of the unintended consequences of using hard power, therefore she argues that when regime change takes place by force there must be conditions made for what comes next (Rice, 2008). This means that eradicating a government is not the accomplishment of a regime change but it must be replaced with a stable economic and political system for a successful and sustainable regime change.

Hard power is an important tool to change a regime, but it should be combined with international support, diplomacy, and soft power for reconstruction post conflict.

Lack of these elements in Afghanistan and Iraq conflict could be some of the highlights for why regime change, and democratization did not work in these societies. Soft power which can attract and influence states in terms of culture, ideology and normative means. Since with soft power popular beliefs and eventually societies can be shaped it can be a great tool to be used in regions which just came out of conflict to reconstruct. It can be used to rebuild and strengthen political culture, human capital, and civil society in post conflict societies. According to Joseph Nye soft power can greatly help sustain and promote democracy through free and fair elections, free media, building institutions which are elements of soft power. As a result, this will lead to develop a stable political, economic, and human capital. (Nye, 2004)

Soft power can also help post conflict societies practice sovereignty. As Nye argues that soft power can facilitate and be invested in democratic institutions like education, governance, elections, and healthcare which will help develop a strong human capital to run the system. He argues that with proper investment in building human capital post conflict in Iraq it could benefit from sustaining and progressing social, political and economic growth. (Nye, 2008)

To conclude, there is no right answer to under which condition will regime change work, there is no set formula. It will always be followed by civil casualties, and unintended consequences if forced is used. Yet, it has to potential to help build nations if force is combined with diplomacy and mindful planning. In other words, to have a combination of hard power and soft power. Meaning, to use hard power to topple the autocratic regime and soft power to help rebuild after the conflict and sustain and promote democratic values.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

According to research conducted by Brown University, not only did this conflict rack up expenses amounting to more than two trillion dollars, but it also resulted in the loss of many lives. This conflict took the lives of more than two thousand United States military personnel in addition to one hundred thousand Afghan civilians. This conflict resulted in the loss of one hundred thousand stories, one hundred thousand dreams, and one hundred thousand families. After the Taliban took control of Kabul, the majority of the younger generation, which included those who aspired to lead the country in the future, fled the country. This is perhaps the most heartbreaking aspect of the situation. These brilliant minds that departed the country out of fear of being prosecuted and executed by the Taliban were supposed to be Afghanistan's future, a small but important array of hope, the generation of democracy, social media, startups, entrepreneurs, students, teachers, and doctors for the country. Nevertheless, they were forced to flee the country.

Imagine if this approach really worked, what if this nation building project was a success and today, we had a free and democratic Afghanistan. The future for Afghanistan will remain uncertain since it is currently not recognized by any country around the world. Yet one can think about how significant of a difference it would make socially and politically if the missions to democratize Afghanistan worked. Human rights would not have been abused on a daily basis, gender gaps would have been addressed, and basic rights of Afghan citizens would have been respected regardless of their ethnicity, or religion. To get into details: if these new educated young minds were to be the future leaders of Afghanistan government of the country would have been democratic instead of

the current autocracy prevalent, people could choose for who to represent them and vote for them instead of being captured in this geographic prison under house arrest in the name of a government.

There is no well-defined organizational structure that can be used to identify the style of governance practiced by the Taliban. Furthermore, the withdrawal of US forces may have triggered the continuance of having a power sharing system if it had been handled with greater responsibility. Meaning that the nation would have its own parliament, with representatives from all 34 provinces, a strong independent judicial branch, a president elected through a fair and transparent process, a constitution, and last but not least, a respectful life for all Afghans to practice voting and express themselves freely in public without fear of retaliation.

Although it has been almost two years since girls in Afghanistan have been prohibited from attending school, the gender inequality gap continues to widen with each passing day. Prioritizing education is the need of the hour to help the country get out of this catastrophe. None of this can be accomplished if the primary component, which is education, is missing. If this project was a success, it would be possible for women to enter the workforce and higher education institutions, helping to close the gender gap and contributing to the growth of human capital. Affirmative action measures would be implemented to further the cause of gender equality in cities and rural areas. Equally essential minority groups and populations at risk of social exclusion would be able to access equitable opportunities in the fields of education and social welfare.

Not only does the current government lack all of these social characteristics, but on an economic level, it does not have policies in place that can assist the country in

getting back on its feet after such a protracted war. Peace and stability are the two fundamental components of a stable society. However, even now, with the takeover by the Taliban, Afghans are not permitted to have protests to ask for their basic rights, the media is not permitted to report their injustices, and the judicial branch is heavily influenced by the Taliban.

There is no such thing as the police or the military; all of their troops are Jihadists who have received radical Islamic education from madrasas, but they have not been professionally educated to treat citizens with respect and decency. All of this contributes to the ongoing violations of human rights that are taking place in Afghanistan, an issue that the international community has decided to ignore.

As things stand right now, we don't have a whole lot of choices left in terms of how to approach this issue. Either the major actors like the United States and China are busy with figuring out how to recover from the recent financial crisis due to the pandemic, or they are focusing the majority of their effort on the reconstruction of Ukraine. Since the United States has chosen to take a hands-off approach in their policy towards Afghanistan, it is possible that they did so either to cut their costs, which led to bringing an end to the war or perse to facilitate the takeover of Afghanistan by a terrorist organization.

Now, one approach that could be taken to address this issue would be for the United States to keep a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan and make an effort to engage in dialogue with the Taliban in an effort to convince them to either adopt new policies or withdraw their existing harsh policies. This is a challenging task because, unlike the

conflict in Ukraine, it is not a war against tanks or bullets; rather, it is a war against shifting ideologies and views, which makes the situation more difficult.

Another approach can be international economic and regulatory sanctions, but this would only make the current humanitarian crisis worse. Not only that if the United States decides to engage with the Taliban through diplomacy, but it also means they will have to recognize them as the legitimate government. Given the history of the Taliban and their support for international terrorism this could trigger the international community against the United States for recognizing them. Another strategy can be going back and repeating the history and doing everything they did right after 9/11 incidents which is maintaining military presence in Afghanistan to fight against terrorism and human rights abuses.

This brings us to conclude that the failure of this democracy promotion and nation building project was not something which occurred overnight; but it was a series of complex events which eventually led to its failure. These factors include political, social, and economic failures throughout the last two decades. In more details, corruption was one of the major elements to make the rule of law less trustworthy and legitimacy among people. Another factor can be the existence of many ethnic groups and its diversity. Which led to never making Afghans unable to come up with a solid strong national identity. In addition, lack of local support, engagement with local and rural communities, unrealistic expectations by the US policy makers and the aim to impose western values on a conservative Islamic society made it even harder to implement this project.

A free, sovereign, and democratic Afghanistan remains a dream for me and many Afghans soon. To make this dream come to reality it will require significant efforts from both local and international actors to bring a complete independent, inclusive, and stable

social and political structure where people's voices are echoed loudly, and they get to choose how their future government should look like.

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