Efficacy of Repressive Counter-terrorism

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Research Question: To what extent was the failure of the US' counter-terrorism strategy

the main factor in the August 2021 Taliban resurgence?

Referencing Style: MLA

Word Count: 3991

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<u>Introduction</u>

The Taliban Islamic Movement is a militant Islamist and jihadist political movement in Afghanistan that aims to reimpose strict Islamic rule. It has been regarded by many nations - such as the US - as a terrorist organization. Though the Taliban controlled most of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, in October of 2001, US-allied forces invaded Afghanistan to oust their regime following the Taliban's refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden - a terrorist leader who was involved in orchestrating al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks in the US. Following the US-led invasion, Taliban leadership relocated to Southern Afghanistan from which they waged a 20-year insurgency against the western-backed Kabul administration, the national security forces, and the international coalition troops led by the US (Rashid, 22).

In 2020, peace negotiations between the Afghan government, the US, and the Taliban were rekindled as discussions of establishing a framework for Afghan society after US troop withdrawal began. Amid conflicts of interest and contrasting opinions on what the ideal Afghan state looks like, Taliban leaders refused to partake in further discussions until all foreign troops departed (McKinnon, "Timeline: US War in Afghanistan"). However, on August 15th 2021, mere hours after President Ashraf Ghani fled the country, Taliban leaders seized power in Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, and took their place in the presidential palace; paving the way for full US withdrawal from Afghanistan by August 30th - leaving the state under complete Taliban rule (Zucchino, "The U.S. War in Afghanistan: How It Started, and How It Ended").

This paper aims to investigate the question "To what extent was the failure of the US' counter-terrorism strategy the main factor in the August 2021 Taliban resurgence?".This will be explored

by examining the strategic and structural shortcomings of the US' counter-terrorism strategy and the implications posed by their withdrawal on a national and global level. Simultaneously, considerations of other contributing factors such as the political legitimacy within Afghanistan and shifting public perception of political actors will also be analyzed.

This research question is worthy of investigation because the issues it explores are controversial in nature - generating debate over the relative value of repressive counter-terrorism strategy as well as foreign military intervention in resolving conflict and countering contemporary non-state actors such as terrorist organizations. Moreover, it allows for conclusions to be drawn about whether legitimacy is something that is obtained or developed.

Methodology

The sources I have used consisted of books, journal articles, news articles, digitally published university lectures, declassified US strategy reports, and US Congress hearing transcriptions. As my research centered primarily around US policy and counter-terrorism strategy I referred to many official reports, transcriptions, and press releases published by US government agencies and organizations. Most notably, when researching US activity in Afghanistan, I relied on declassified reports written by John F. Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, and transcriptions from the Committee on Foreign Affairs Congress hearings. As government-affiliated sources, both sources provided invaluable insight into the strategic objectives and shortcomings of the US and presented specific statistical data and primary evidence that up until recently was not publicly releasable. However, due to concerns of potential bias and omission of information because of any political agendas, I corroborated all aforementioned evidence with

news articles about the respective events to ensure the viability of the information. In terms of information on Afghanistan, I consulted books by Gilles Dorronsoro and Carter Malkasian, whose research focuses on security and political development in Afghanistan; moreover, both authors respectively spent 3 and 2 years in Afghanistan to directly compile information for their books. Despite following different schools of thought, with Malkasian being a realist whilst Dorronsoro possesses a post-colonial perspective, both authors are Western writers - hence, I referred to journal articles by regional writers like Rajan Jha and Wahidullah Azizi to better understand the political environment within Afghanistan and South Asia.

I evaluated the US counter-terrorism strategy and the Taliban's endeavors through concepts of power, sovereignty, and legitimacy to examine the causes and consequences of each political actor's actions throughout the conflict. With the aid of Galtung's conflict triangle, the elements of violence within this case study could be analyzed and better understood. Moreover, I used the foundational theories of Realism and Liberalism when analyzing the US' decision to remain within Afghanistan following the death of Osama bin Laden. To further enrich my understanding of the conflict, I employed the critical theories of Constructivism, Post-colonialism, and Just War theory. This was useful because it allowed me to explore a variety of perspectives when evaluating the extent to which the Taliban resurgence could be attributed to US involvement. Furthermore, due to the focus of my research question, the majority of my essay will follow a national and community level of analysis pertaining to Afghanistan and specific Afghan provinces and districts; however, I will also discuss the implications of key events, mainly the US withdrawal, on a wider global political scale.

US Counter-terrorism Strategy

US Strategic and Structural Shortcomings

Over the course of the 20-year conflict, the US struggled to develop and implement a coherent and focused strategy for what it hoped to achieve in Afghanistan, this put them in a disadvantageous position. Due to this, "US officials faced many challenges in creating long-term sustainable improvements" (Sopko, "Lessons from Afghanistan", 10) in Afghanistan, thus, jeopardizing their mission. The strategic shortcomings of the US can be attributed to three principal factors: poor division of labor, unrealistic timelines, and having a constantly changing objective.

When dividing responsibilities amongst the multitude of US agencies, the agency's strengths, weaknesses, and realistic capabilities were not always taken into consideration. For example, even though the Department of State was supposed to lead all reconstruction efforts they were not allocated sufficient resources or expertise to be able to pioneer successful frameworks to establish stability within Afghanistan (15). This dissonance between the division of responsibilities and the actual capability of each agency created an inefficient environment; thereby, making it difficult to enact any long-lasting change as plans were not always executed to the fullest capacity or highest standard.

Additionally, U.S. officials often underestimated the amount of time and resources required to achieve large-scale objectives like disbanding the Taliban and building a stable liberal democracy within Afghanistan. As a result, they were often pushed to resort to short-term solutions as was notably seen from 2009 to 2011 with the surge of troops, money, and resources deployed (United States, Congress, House, Committee of Foreign Affairs, 44). This approach achieved many rapid

short-term victories; however, once again the question of sustainability arises - most territories were taken back by the Taliban soon after coalition victories against the insurgent forces. By 2018, the Afghan government's territorial control had plummeted to 55.5%, despite being nearly 65.2% just a year prior, with the Nawur district of the Ghazni province being one of 10 districts that Taliban forces gained control over (Sopko, "2018 Quarterly Report", 69-74). This ineptitude to sustain victories and carry out measurable change raises doubt over the effectiveness of the US strategy as a whole.

Lastly, the key objective for US intervention within Afghanistan was frequently changed. Although initially, the United States' vital national interest within Afghanistan was to "defeat al-Qaeda and bring Osama bin Laden to justice" as retaliation for the 9/11 terrorist attack (qtd. "Remarks by the President on Afghanistan"); over time that central objective was modified and ultimately completely replaced. US strategy grew considerably in scope to also encompass the consummate defeat of the Taliban, restoration and reconstruction of Afghanistan, regulation and suppression of corruption enacted by Afghan officials, and enhancement of security networks within areas targeted by Taliban insurgent troops (United States, Congress, House, Committee of Foreign Affair, 50). These new all-encompassing objectives were imprecise, lacked clear direction, and often were not measurable which resulted in the consumption of resources at a rate that was relatively disproportionate to the success of operations. The most pressing matter was the ambiguous nature of objectives which made it difficult to make conclusive decisions about how US strategy was unfolding and developing. For example, the 2009 US military strategy detailed "ending endemic corruption and rebuilding Afghanistan's economy" (Sopko, "Lessons from Afghanistan", 24) but at what stage and according to which indicators could it have been

determined with absolute certainty the Afghan government was free of corruption? This is why as US objectives became more closely interlinked with intangible and unquantifiable constructs, the scope of the US' mission within Afghanistan became more ambitious, costly, and uncoordinated.

Comparing US and Taliban Strategy

On the other hand, the Taliban appeared to be learning from their past mistakes and were quick to exploit the weaknesses of their adversaries: the International Coalition led by the US and the Afghan government.

One important aspect of the Taliban's strategy is their focus on building local support by addressing widespread social grievances; their "propaganda heavily honed in on the widely perceived corruption of the Afghan government, the lack of basic services…and the historical narrative to fight against infidel invaders" (Dorronsoro, 12). Most notably, TV broadcasts in April of 2008 containing graphic pictures of the corpses of women and babies who were, allegedly, killed by the IC thoroughly resonated with the older population of Afghans who remembered the Soviet occupation (17). In doing so, they were able to generate support, or at the very least sympathy and tolerance, towards their cause. Moreover, following their ousting from power in 2001, the Taliban's strategy began to incorporate aspects of diplomacy and soft power. This is particularly evident in the Spring Offensives of 2007 where the jihadist group placed political figures and leaders, who were not directly linked to the armed Taliban forces, within the Helmand and Kandahar provinces (Friel, "NATO Afghan Spring Offensives in Helmand"). Through a realist lens, such a tactic can be interpreted as a way of consolidating their reach of power and enlarging their sphere of influence by conveying a willingness to govern the people. They exploited

weaknesses in the frameworks established by the US to gain territorial control and strategic advantages which simultaneously offered a solution to Afghans deeply frustrated by the insecurity resulting from absences and corruption of state institutions on a local level (Dorronsoro, 9).

Furthermore, the Taliban's structure meant that they had increased adaptability and resilience, particularly regarding transitions in leadership, allowing them to remain fully operational for most of the 20-year conflict. As a contemporary non-state actor, the Taliban is not limited by the resources, territory, national agenda, and domestic issues of any single state. Despite being based in Afghanistan, the Taliban is still able to recruit from and train their soldiers within neighboring states like Pakistan. Their political structure has organized the Taliban movement into several smaller groups, through the division of territory and delegation of specific roles, which allows them to remain centralized enough to maintain efficiency but flexible and diverse enough to easily adapt to changes. Taliban leadership "established 18 commissions which function like ministries, dealing with military, political, economic, media and culture, public works, intelligence, and other matters" (Sayed, "How are the Taliban Organized?") which allowed them to have a multi-faceted framework that addresses a variety of issues at once. Additionally, unlike the US, since the group is solely driven by their Islamist ideology, they are able to prioritize the goal of creating an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan above all other concerns that may arise - including unexpected transitions in leadership. Even after the International Coalition killed Taliban senior leaders and military commanders, such as the instances of Mullah Akhtar in December 2006 and Mullah Dadullah in May 2007, the Taliban's composition ensured that unforeseen changes did not reverse the momentum of their activities (Dorronsoro, 10). Even though senior leaders are responsible for strategizing and developing a plan of action, the jihadist group had focused and specific objectives

which allow them to rapidly restore order and reinitiate activity after any leadership change. On the other hand, the dynamic nature of US objectives compromised their ability to maintain a similar level of resilience and goal orientation.

Implications of US Withdrawal

As the conflict in Afghanistan approached its 20-year mark, it became apparent that the force-based repressive counter-terrorism approach that the US had adopted was ineffective and continuously draining resources and finances. Hence, a new counter-terrorism strategy had to be employed; as such, a political approach was explored to address the political causes of terrorism and not just its violent manifestations. In February 2020, a United States-Taliban bilateral accord released 5,000 Taliban prisoners and set May 2021 as a deadline for the withdrawal of remaining U.S. combat troops. In return, the Taliban would not target remaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan and agreed to cut off links with all transnational jihadist groups - specifically al-Qaeda (Herd, "The Causes and the Consequences of Strategic Failure in Afghanistan"). Although widely perceived as a successful smart-power tactic, the exclusion of the Afghan government from the accord negotiations undermined their position and provided the Taliban with a diplomatic victory. This demonstrates one of the biggest criticisms of tackling terrorism through political deals: emboldening and strengthening the terrorist group by lending them legitimacy (Heywood, 301).

On a national level, the withdrawal of US troops, and by extension the presence of the International Coalition, held catastrophic consequences for the Kabul administration and Afghan forces. Since the initial invasion of the US and their allied forces in 2001, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) were built to "operate within the framework of coalition support that was available"

(Shoebridge, "Afghanistan Withdrawal, Reckless or Ruthless") which included everything from rapid close air support to maintenance and surveillance. Consequently, once this framework was removed, and without the backing of US and NATO power, the ANSF was placed at a disadvantage against the Taliban.

On the other hand, interestingly, the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan was completed in August of 2021 shortly following President Joe Biden's July announcement to withdraw US combat troops from neighboring Iraq (Smith, "United States in Iraq"). These withdrawals from the decade-long conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq indicate a shift in U.S foreign policy, and possibly a shift in American focus away from the Middle East and Central Asia to regions like the Indo-Pacific to address other focuses such as the systemic challenge presented by China (Shoebridge, "Afghanistan Withdrawal, Reckless or Ruthless"). This indicates that the US' counter-terrorism strategy did not initially account for the potential emergence of other pressing concerns, hence, their abrupt departure compromised their efforts in the region and held other international implications. On a broader global political scale, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan inspired the return of nationalist protectionist discourse in Europe. The expected Afghan refugee influx had right-leaning parties fearing a repeat of the political turbulence experienced in 2015 and early 2016, when approximately 1.3 million migrants, mostly from Syria but also Afghanistan and Iraq, arrived in Europe (Spindler, "2015 Europe's Migrant Crisis"). Austria was, most notably, among six EU states that insisted on their right to maintain policies of deporting rejected Afghan asylum seekers. In fact, a survey by the Austrian newspaper Osterreich showed 90% of Austrians supported their government's stance to prioritize internal affairs and concerns (Giuffrida, "Afghan influx reopens divisions over refugees in Europe").

<u>Underlying and contributing factors</u>

It is important to take into account that many factors played a direct role in shaping the socio-political climate within Afghanistan to enable a Taliban takeover. Some factors were pre-existing and deeply rooted within Afghan society; whilst others were conflict-born and evolved according to key events and occurrences. These underlying and contributing factors, some of which were out of the US' power or ability to change, directly influenced the outcome of the conflict. Consideration of those factors allows for the assessment of latent level conditions within Afghanistan using Galtung's Conflict Triangle.

The principal influences include the political legitimacy within Afghanistan which examines the role of Islam in Afghan politics as a source of legitimacy; and the constituents that gradually damaged the legitimacy of the Kabul administration. Another factor encompasses the key events and tactics that gradually altered public perception of the involved political actors, to decrease hostility towards the Islamist group.

Political Legitimacy in Afghanistan

In order to examine political legitimacy within Afghanistan, the role that Islam plays within a political context must first be addressed. This is necessary due to the differing geographical, socioeconomic, and cultural bases that distinguish the nature of the 'state' in Afghanistan from Western powers like the USA.

Afghanistan is both geographically vast, spanning a crossroad between Central Asia and South Asia, and culturally and ethnically diverse which gives rise to sectarian divide and tribal conflict - all of which threatens Afghan security and stability. In the midst of this, Islam has historically played an integral role in creating national stability by instilling a sense of national unity. As written in *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues* (vol. 17: 4: 116), government bodies in Afghanistan have always sought consultation and approval for their actions from local Islamic scholars - many of whom assume informal leadership positions within Afghan communities, by giving input on everything from personal and financial issues to legal disputes and city development strategies. This demonstrates the degree of influence that religious leaders hold in Afghan society. Given this context, it could be further argued that religious prowess came to be viewed as a source of legitimate power and authority in Afghanistan.

Moreover, structural violence and corruption practiced by the Afghan government weakened their legitimacy on a local level and made Afghanistan more susceptible to a Taliban resurgence. At the onset of the 2000s, following the initial "defeat" of the Taliban regime in 2001, a pattern of systemic inequality arose in Afghanistan, particularly within southern provinces such as Helmand and Kandahar. Newly introduced regulation policies disfavored certain poorer groups of poppy farmers in Garmser by "eradicating [their] poppy fields…and offering subsidies to [other] more favorable groups" ("The American War in Afghanistan: A History", 08:00 - 08:33). Such systemic discrimination was dis-empowering to mistreated populations and presented "corrosive effects on the overall governance and development of Afghanistan" ("Impact of Corruption on Growth", 6) by driving certain minorities to favor the Taliban, or at the least become more tolerant and accepting of the Islamist group. Furthermore, government corruption reduced the combat

effectiveness of Afghan forces by reducing the amount of money available for material capabilities and advancements. An example of this is Major General Mohammad Kohistani from the Afghan Ministry of Internal Affairs who was convicted in September of 2018 for embezzlement of approximately USD 1.7 million (Azizi, "Corruption and demise of the Afghan government"). This further illustrates how the Kabul administration committed structural violence by forcibly and consciously limiting opportunities for human development and failing to effectively distribute resources to protect its citizens from preventable harm; in turn, weakening the legitimacy of Afghan political officials. Moreover, through facilitating inefficient governing processes that are open to infiltration and dismantling, Afghanistan's susceptibility to Taliban influence increased.

Public Perception of involved political actors

The prolonged presence of US troops within Afghanistan, long after achieving their initial goals, presented the US as a western occupying force rather than a foreign ally. Following the death of Osama Bin Laden in 2011, the American public was content with a 'successful' retaliation against the responsible figures for 9/11 (Phillips, "When Americans started souring on the war in Afghanistan"). In fact, a Gallup survey found that by 2015 "approximately 54% of US voters believed that continuing to send troops to Afghanistan was a mistake" (Brenan, "American Split on Afghan War"). This was also largely due to the heavy expenses associated with maintaining a US presence in Afghanistan - which many saw as unnecessary given that the perpetrators of the September 11th terrorist attack had been brought to justice. In May 2014, former President Barack Obama announced that the US planned to fully vacate Afghanistan by 2016; however, the appearance of ISIS within the region raised domestic concerns regarding future withdrawal (Brenan, "American Split on Afghan War"). The looming presence of renewed terrorist activity

within the region meant that withdrawing troops would've held negative implications for the next presidential elections, consequently, domestic US concerns were prioritized over a genuine assessment of military necessity within Afghanistan. This implied that the US presence within Afghanistan was more closely linked to selfish pursuit and fulfilling their national agenda rather than earnest protection of Afghan civil liberties and the sovereignty of the Afghan state. This was further reflected by the lack of consistent objectives for what the US hoped to achieve in Afghanistan.

An offensive structural realist assessment of the situation would point towards the necessity of retaining power, attaining hegemony, and prioritizing state survival. Hence, this indicates that the US' response to any terrorist threat should be uncompromising and justifies a prolonged presence in Afghanistan due to national interest. Meanwhile, a liberal view would also justify military intervention, though within 'moral bounds', it would also emphasize the importance of ethical practice rather than national interest. On the other hand, a critical constructivist and post-colonial appraisal of the conflict in Afghanistan would point out that the concept of sovereignty, and by extension the contours of the modern state system, were imposed on the colonial world by European and Western powers. Hence, sovereignty as understood in a Westphalian context may be inapplicable to Afghanistan and, on a global political scale, to the central Asian region in general. Therefore, questioning whether the Afghan government's sovereignty being challenged by the Taliban warrant just cause, and fulfills the criterion of *jus ad Bellum*, for armed intervention by the US. It can be argued that a western intervention built upon a construct that is propagated by the west provides an invalid basis for action, therefore, alluding that the US never possessed just

reason to enter Afghanistan - making their interference the primary cause for the conflict and the outcome.

Furthermore, the Taliban perpetuated an image of jihadists fighting alleged occupying colonial forces in the protection of Islam and the pursuit of liberation through resistance. In doing so, they leveraged the previously discussed role of Islam to provide political legitimacy to their group and cause, and more importantly to attempt to sway public opinion in their favor. Meanwhile, the Afghan government had aligned itself with a non-muslim country with a long history of colonization and occupation of middle-eastern nations. Therefore, the public perception of the involved political actors had become skewed, driven by an antagonization of the US and, in turn, the Afghan government - whose officials were sometimes called "American Puppets" (qtd. Malkasian, 241).

Following the siege of Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, Suhail Shaheen, the official Taliban spokesperson, described the Taliban as "a government of the people of Afghanistan that caters to all ethnicities [and] not a government imposed on the people as a result of occupation or an invasion" ("One-on-one with Suhail Shaheen", 03:22 - 03:30). This quote perfectly summarizes the image that the Taliban perpetuated of their adversaries throughout the decades-long conflict. The Taliban was able to distort the public perception of the Kabul administration by: alluding to their corrupt practices and discrimination against Southern provincial populations and questioning their legitimacy for being instated by alleged occupying forces. This, simultaneously, made Afghans more susceptible to following the Taliban and increased leniency toward a Taliban resurgence to power.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the August 2021 Taliban resurgence marked the end of a complex and multifaceted conflict within Afghanistan. The US counter-terrorism strategy in their fight to disband the Taliban whilst reconstructing a liberal democratic Afghan state was often unfocused and underestimated the amount of time and resources that were needed to instill a sustainable change. Unrealistic execution timelines and rushed operations increased the ANSF's dependence on the IC for success against the insurgent forces and enabled corrupt structures to arise within newly established institutions and frameworks. Consequently, US reconstruction efforts became futile as their endeavors were easily infiltrated and dismantled by Taliban forces. Comparatively, the Taliban, being a non-state actor led by ideology, had a unified goal that made them less likely to face defections like the national Afghan forces, and their authoritative structure allowed hasty recovery through unexpected transitions of leadership. Moreover, attempts to establish legitimacy on a greater political scale saw the Taliban utilizing diplomacy and soft power to appeal to Afghani civilians. In turn, there was a shift in the public perception of the US and the western-backed Kabul administration - whose legitimacy was slowly eroding due to corrupt practices, structurally violent policies, and blatantly excessive dependence on US troops for successful results. Through painting a picture of jihadists fighting oppressive occupying powers, the Taliban regime used religion to justify their actions and antagonize the Afghan government.

As demonstrated within this essay, many pre-existing factors paved the way for the eventual result of this conflict which were not directly within the US' power to change. However, whilst it is not possible to solely attribute the August 2021 Taliban resurgence to the weaknesses of their counter-

terrorism strategy, the United States' inability to fully demobilize the Islamist group prompted the Taliban to change their strategic approach and allowed them ample time to restore and strengthen their forces. In turn, this enabled them to seize control of Afghanistan in August of 2021 and emerge victorious from the 20-year conflict.

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