

Afghanistan Hearing Written Statement by Earl Anthony Wayne, June 17, 2025

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Afghanistan: Lessons from my observations and involvement with Afghanistan policies, 2001-2024

I was involved with Afghanistan from the fall/winter of 2001-2002 until early 2003. I was serving as Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs. I helped lead work with US and international planning and organization to aid Afghanistan after the Taliban regime fell and a new government was being established. My involvement continued until early 2003.

I served in Kabul Afghanistan in two Ambassadorial ranked positions from in 2009-11. Since 2016, I have led informal, private discussions among experts and officials and have written and spoken on Afghanistan issues (see www.eawayne.com). This informal group has met every 6-8 weeks to keep up with Afghanistan issues and to help members be supportive of better outcomes. This group has included current and former US and Afghan officials as well as others, both as regular invitees and as special invitees.

The US made a series of important contributions to Afghanistan as well as mistakes, some strategic, many tactical, throughout our 20 years or so of involvement in Afghanistan. Some of the important missteps involved the capacities of our institutions and staff to surge, to communicate, and to deliver and evaluate results on the ground. Some of these mistakes, we repeated during the years as lessons were not learned and shared. But importantly, many of the lessons must be “learned” and “internalized” in our national or institutional “memory banks.”

At present, we are still grappling with the many consequences of a very poor exit strategy and poor implementation of our departure which left the US and our Afghan partners with massive humanitarian, human rights and “moral responsibility” challenges. It left us all with a repressive Taliban regime and with very little US leverage available to influence Taliban behavior. The international reputational costs of our poor exit have also been substantial and there is much to learn and apply as we move forward.

A few **bigger examples missteps and miscalculations include:**

- We very poorly organized the international aid effort in 2002. The Taliban government had been swept away, but the new Afghan government faced massive challenges to recreate ministries, security, service delivery, etc. The initial idea of how to organize ongoing relief, rebuilding and development assistance from

international donor countries and organizations was to give the leading responsibility to specific donors for different sectors. However, it became clear in early months that under this approach there was not effective cooperation among donors or systems for monitoring and evaluating success. It was not as successful as desired or needed. For better or worse, the US gradually established a wide-ranging aid program, and different donors continued to invest in projects of interest to them. This resulted in Afghan ministries being confronted with a range of different donor demands and systems (including at times different demands and offers from US civilian and military entities). Eventually, number of donors agreed to contribute to trust funds, notably the World Bank Trust Fund for development assistance, which eased some of the coordinating burden. And efforts, were made to have regular donor coordination meetings so donors and the Afghan government could coordinate. These were manageable arrangements, but they fell far short of an effective, transparent processes for distributing assistance and measuring results.

- On the political/military side, the US made a major miscalculation in failing to seriously explore or accept Taliban expressions of interest in reconciling when they were weak and disrupted in late 2001. Secretary Rumsfeld and others are reported to have dismissed the offers. Another offer reportedly came in 2003. Seeking reconciliation should have been a US priority to limit our strategic commitment and to craft an exit strategy that allowed for fewer US and partner security forces and exploring a peaceful path to an economically developing Afghanistan that would not be exporting terrorism or instability.
- By late 2002/early 2003, we reduced our attention to Afghanistan and shifted focus and money to Iraq where we were preparing to launch a very costly and ill-conceived invasion. This significantly undermined our efforts in Afghanistan to reestablish a secure and stable regime and to build regional cooperation to this end. Effectively, we failed to invest heavily early in Afghanistan when we had the advantage in a military or civilian structure to coordinate aid and efforts to help build institutions and when creative diplomacy might have been able to establish a path to reconciliation and development with effective international and regional support.
- Overtime, we did have successes in education and health investments in Afghanistan, but we did not seem to learn well how to help build stronger Afghan government institutions or to deal effectively with the dynamics of Afghan politics. Our development and aid programs were not effectively designed and synced with security assistance, nor were our assignment/personnel policies designed to provide for the length of service and expertise needed to maximize impact. On a micro level, our commander's development specialists and diplomats were far too

often relearning the practical lessons about work in Afghanistan that their predecessors had learned on earlier tours.

- More broadly, we poorly understood Afghanistan and the dynamics of its politics and society. This held for the Taliban too – we did not understand that group well, its dynamics or its motivation. We never develop with our Afghan partners and effective plan to sap Taliban morale or its attraction. (In fact, they were able to be mobilized based on the US image as a foreign invader.) We reinforced this lack of understanding with our short-term rotating assignments for US personnel in the country. Not enough of us could speak the native languages well.
- The Taliban were able to regroup and rebuild in Pakistan. Even during the “surge” from 2009-11, we never developed an effective strategy to get the government of Pakistan to limit their safe havens. Nor did we develop an independent military strategy to effectively inhibit the Taliban in Pakistan. We rather built anti-American sentiment in Pakistan with our overall approach. This Taliban “haven” or sanctuary was a significant flaw in US policy.
- In this connection, three US administrations could not forge or maintain a longer-term vision, strategy, or timetable. Once the US decided that we needed to help build basic institutions in the country to assure US security interests, we needed to be willing to plan for the time it takes to create institutions that could last and function well. That takes a five, ten, or twenty-year consistent investment. This was particularly clear from the side of providing civilian assistance, but it also held for military, public security, and intelligence institutions. A prime example was the Obama civilian surge. We announced the end time frame for our surge when we announced the surge itself, and the US and partners were at full military and civilian strength for less than a year. On the civilian side, we saw the need to plan for assistance provision over the longer term and so did some of our military colleagues.
- In this connection, we did not successfully figure out how to best aid the Afghans to build institutions and capacities that were good enough to produce positive results and that they could run by themselves. These challenges were especially clear on the military and public security side and especially in the final years and months of US presence where the most effective “Afghan” military tools were dependent on US contractors to operate.
- We did not sufficiently recognize that our own spending was reinforcing corruption and undermining governance, nor did we find effective strategies to hold corruption in check or reduce it. There was far too rarely a price to pay for corruption, and our efforts to create stronger anti-corruption institutions largely failed. Also, with all our spending to support the surge, we boosted the Afghan economy ways that were not sustainable. For example, we warned from the Embassy in 2009 and 2010 that if we

abruptly ended our significant spending to support the surge, the Afghan economy (and GDP) would drop significantly. That happened in 2013 and subsequent years.

- We did not develop sufficient strategies for dealing with the weaknesses among our Afghan partners and to overcome their factionalism, the tensions between a constitution that promoted a strong central government and the strong preferences for decentralization and more regional autonomy among many Afghans. These Afghan tensions plagued the US involvement throughout our 20-year presence, and the non-Taliban Afghans often relied on the US and other internationals to help them sort through their own weaknesses and division rather than finding Afghan solutions. This Afghan factionalism became especially evident as the US drew down and planned to leave.
- In this context, it is important to recall that the same strategic and timeframe problems apply to making democratic institutions function well – it takes a lot of time and coaxing – more than we were willing to invest. And it takes serious local (Afghan) buy-in and leadership over time. I often think of the time and effort required for South Korea to move from corrupt, dictatorship to a functioning democratic system.
- In this connection, we educated and supported the development of a very capable generation of young leaders with an international perspective and a desire for a “modern” Afghanistan. However, they were blocked from authority in many cases by corrupt warlords and long-in-the-tooth politicians, who continued to jockey for power right up to the Taliban takeover of Kabul. The patron-client, and family-clan-tribe-region-religious ties remained very strong compared to more “modern” political ties. We did not develop a successful approach to deal with this daunting challenge.
- The Obama years ended with a military draw down that sapped the Afghan economy and morale but did not “pull the plug.” Obama was persuaded not to leave in part because of arguments that he should not preclude a fresh look by his successor. Thus, the US had a “gap” in strategic direction.
- The Trump years began with a well-crafted strategy couched in a regional context that promised to use a range of tools including more active Afghan/US targeting of the Taliban to get to the negotiating table. This strategy was driven by National Security Advisor, General H.R. McMaster. In concept, it seemed to have a chance not of “winning” but of getting the Taliban and Pakistan more interested in talking about a solution. But as its enhanced military attacks on the Taliban were implemented, it also clearly fed resentment among Afghans living in areas where the US and Afghan national forces carried out raids. In any case, by late summer of

2018, Trump changed National Security Advisors and US strategy to put a focus on negotiating a deal with the Taliban and getting US troops out.

- This policy resulted in a very bad deal with the Taliban under which the US would give up much leverage and not hold the Taliban accountable for delivering much. It did not involve the Kabul government substantially in the negotiating process, but the US would press the government in Kabul to make concessions such as releasing 5,000 Taliban prisoners. This led to sapping of morale among Afghan security forces and elites and seemed to fuel further infighting in Kabul between President Ghani and other elites.
- This US process prioritized a US troop drawdown as Trump desired. But it failed to recognize a) the need for a prolonged period to build trust and reconciliation for a government that could embrace Taliban and non-Taliban, and b) the need for substantial external leverage to keep the parties abiding by any agreement.
- The very bad deal negotiated under Trump and the very poorly designed drawdown at the end of his administration, set the stage for a disastrous departure scenario under the new Biden administration once President Biden decided to stick to the withdrawal timetable that the Trump administration had set with the Taliban.
- The US further undermined remaining Afghan air and special forces capacity with drawdowns of essential US contractors, while the Taliban successfully waged a political-military campaign to take over large swaths of Afghanistan, while the Kabul government floundered.
- Meanwhile, the USG did not plan well for taking care of the 100,000s of Afghans who had fought with, worked with, and supported the US and who would likely suffer under a Taliban regime. It is hard to understand the poor reading of intelligence and poor planning for those last months. It was a very poor exit strategy devised by the Trump administration and very poor implementation of the exit by the Biden administration.
- Costs were massive: a great blow to the US' international reputation and morale authority; throwing away of 20 year's investment in Afghanistan's people, economy, and institutions; creating massive human suffering via economic collapse, humanitarian crises, and grave abuses of human rights, particularly for women and girls. Plus, the Taliban continued to support al Qaeda.

Some Lessons from the US experience with Afghanistan:

While there will be many lessons to be shared and recalled about the US experience on Afghanistan, here are a few for the United States that stood out to me:

- Need to clearly assess a vision of strategic interests, objectives, and mission, including an exit strategy, in any military intervention. Key players need to be transparent and build consensus around this vision and plan.
- Remember the so-called “Pottery Barn” rule – if you break it, you own it. That is ok, if the overall strategic interests of the US weigh in favor of action, but then one needs responsible for what comes next. Assessments must avoid wishful thinking.
- Need to be clear headed about what is achievable and in what timeframe. This is especially true if trying to build institutions that function and/or democracy that works. These actions take a lot of time and effort and need serious local buy-in. One also needs to be realistic about what capacities one possesses to bring about changes – try not to overestimate your ability to deliver or to underestimate the difficulties you will face.
- Need to devise a realistic exit strategy. If trying to end a civil war or internal conflict or a war between states, one will need a set of checks and balances that remain to encourage adherence to an accord. Make sure one does not overreach or overextend. Need to be honest about timeframes, incentives, leverage, etc. that are needed to build peace and reconciliation. Need to seriously consider possible negative effects of a departure and how to mitigate them.
- If a longer-term mission and presence is agreed as needed for achieving US objectives, then that needs to be explained at home and abroad. Specifics can be adjusted, but the vision needs to be clear headed and well understood. Repeated messaging about timetables for departure should be recognized as potentially counterproductive for achieving US objectives.
- In devising strategies and tactics, whether military or civilian, one needs to understand the human terrain of the country (e.g., culture and politics) and of one’s enemy. One should be explicit, transparent, attentive, and honest about the factors that can undermine one’s efforts, e.g., corruption, safe havens, weak institutions. One needs to try to be honest about progress along the way. Don’t be over optimistic.
- Need to learn and adapt within the strategy but one also needs to be patient and committed to a timeframe that is realistic.
- Need to be humble about our capacities to “win” or to bring about change. We should not be haughty given our technology and military might. We need to realize that changing people, norms, and practices, and building new institutions takes immense effort and time and needs dedicated local partners and support.
- Recognize that many mistakes are likely – admit them and make sure to learn lessons with regular monitoring and evaluation of results – not with “gotcha” motives, but with the idea of learning and getting better.

- Need to know your partners (warts and strengths). At some points one need to try to do enough to overcome serious weakness or you will lose, e.g., corruption and poor service delivery undermined the legitimacy of the Afghan government and the US. Need to find ways to promote strong points among partners, e.g., roles for younger, educated, forward looking leaders. One needs to be patient at the same time. It will be hard to get the balance right here on these and many issues.
- Don't try to build things using US models if they are not appropriate, e.g., Afghan armed forces and key roles of air mobility. Try to find tools and practices that partners can make their own and sustain.
- Admit when you do not know how to do something – do brutally honest evaluations.
- Get the exit strategy as right as possible – plan and think of consequences. US blew this with a poor US-Taliban accord with few checks on the Taliban built in. A poor US drawdown left US with fewer levers and weakened allies, and a poor final pull out scenario with steps that crushed morale and capacity of allies and left the US unprepared to the rapid fall of the Islamic Republic and Kabul.
- As with a decision to enter or to continue in a conflict, don't base an exit on poor assessment of the situation and wishful thinking. One needs to carefully think through the potential consequences and act accordingly. The costs have been and will remain very high for the Afghan people and for the US' reputation in the world. While the violence from the conflict has greatly reduced, but suffering from shortages of food, health care, and jobs/economic activity have grown immensely. Malnutrition and poverty were more widespread. Families sold their children. Women and girls faced severe restrictions. The US left behind hundreds of thousands to whom we owed much for service with us.
- Along the way, don't magnify costs or chances of failure with inconsistent decisions implementing an exit decision, e.g., taking out US contractors for Afghan military with no alternatives developed.
- Again, in an exit, as in other stages of a conflict, be humble, listen and ready to adjust the initial plans.
- Try to deal responsibly with problems that one leaves behind. To its credit, the Biden administration worked to provide more humanitarian aid than any other country since its departure, but other serious lingering problems remain to be addressed, and the situation has not improved for many of those left behind or caught out of Afghanistan.