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Mohammad Rasouli

*The Graduate Center, City University of New York*

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THE U.S. APPROACH TO PEACEBUILDING IN AFGHANISTAN  
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GEORGE W. BUSH, BARACK OBAMA, AND DONALD  
TRUMP ADMINISTRATION POLICIES IN AFGHANISTAN

by

MOHAMMAD RASOULI

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2020

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Mohammad Rasouli

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal  
Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date

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Karen R. Miller

Thesis Advisor

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Date

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Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis

Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## ABSTRACT

The U.S. Approach to Peacebuilding in Afghanistan,  
A comparative analysis of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump  
administration policies in Afghanistan

by

Mohammad Rasouli

Advisor: Professor Karen Miller

This research paper addresses the efforts of the U.S. to achieve some level of reconciliation with the Taliban after more than 18 years of war in Afghanistan. It deals with the history of U.S.-Taliban negotiations and the U.S. initiatives to engage with the Taliban, as well as outlining the challenges to these initiatives and determining how effective they have been. In addition, the prospects of the U.S.-Taliban peace talks are assessed.

Since the 2001 U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, the first two U.S. administrations under consideration—those of George W. Bush and Barack Obama—justified intrusive interventions into the political, economic, and social affairs of Afghanistan under a “state-building” approach to address a combination of security and humanitarian challenges. The U.S. promoted state-building initiatives guided by a liberal peacebuilding ideology that were supposed to promote peace, democracy, and market-led development in the region.

Two years after Trump came to office, his administration abandoned this state-building approach and hopes of a military victory over the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. The question of how to establish lasting peace in Afghanistan has also proven to be troublesome for the U.S. and the

Afghans. The process of peace talks between the U.S. and the Taliban, which started in early 2018, has lacked transparency and a clear strategy. However, it seems that the U.S.-Taliban peace talks in Doha have started the beginning of an end to a supposedly “endless war” for the U.S. Nonetheless, this might not end the conflict within Afghanistan, as the U.S. peace deal with the Taliban is more likely to create the conditions for future civil war than a sustainable peace among Afghans.

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## INTRODUCTION

The U.S. peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan began after the fall of the Taliban regime in December 2001. When the U.S. military, its Western allies, and the Afghan Northern Alliance—the Taliban’s opposing party in the civil war—removed the Taliban regime from power, many Afghan technocrats and Western diplomats hoped to create a stable and representative government. However, establishing a Western-style democracy in a country that had undergone two decades of unrest was a daunting task, given the fact that Afghanistan’s economy is underdeveloped, several ethno-sectarian issues exist among different ethnicities, and most importantly, parallel sources of power to the government—the warlords—were empowered during the two decades of unrest and challenged the legitimacy of the central government in all aspects of governance, such as tax collection, security, and law enforcement.

From 2001 to 2003, the Bush administration paid little attention to these challenges, because the U.S. military strategy was not to stay in Afghanistan for a long time; they were there to “kill or capture” the Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders. However, due to the increase of the insurgency after 2004, the Bush administration changed its Afghanistan war strategy to a state-building strategy. This strategy also proved to be problematic for a number of reasons: first, the Afghan leadership was inexperienced in democratic national governance, which created a hurdle to implementing a representative system by a fair election (Niland 2014); secondly, the U.S. and other Western countries’ focus was on the development of Kabul and other large cities in Afghanistan to make these cities an economic and political model for rural areas. However, this lack of attention to rural areas created the conditions for a resurgence of the Taliban that has challenged governmental control in vast areas of the country (Asey 2019).

In post-Taliban Afghanistan, U.S.-led attempts at creating a strong centralized state in Kabul to guarantee the rule of law have made little progress. The lack of experience and human

capacity in the Kabul administration has created a corrupt system that challenges any attempts to root it out. In the Trump administration's "America first" approach, Afghanistan conflict does not have much value. American policymakers in the Trump era have already lost confidence in their Afghan partners, thus abandoning over a decade of attempts to create a stable, democratic, and centralized regime in Kabul.

This paper examines U.S. peacebuilding in Afghanistan in four chapters. Chapter one discusses the United States' theoretical framework for peacebuilding in Afghanistan, which was based on liberal peacebuilding and state-building; however, each of the different administrations had its own agenda and approach. Chapter two examines U.S. peacebuilding through coercive strategies. This chapter explains that the U.S. military establishment's interest was to build U.S. policy toward Afghanistan around a counterinsurgency strategy; therefore, the military aspect of peacebuilding has been overemphasized and the developmental aspect of state-building has been ignored by all of the U.S. administrations under consideration. Chapter three discusses the U.S. peacebuilding through dialogue. This chapter concludes that the U.S.'s several initiatives to engage with the political faction of the Taliban have not produced any tangible results and there is very little guarantee that the insurgency in Afghanistan will end. On the contrary, the violence might drastically increase because the Taliban leadership has broken into several competing factions. Chapter four is a series of interviews with experts on Afghanistan about their assessment of the U.S. peacebuilding approaches in the country and the prospect of peace among Afghans. These insights support the analysis of this paper that all Afghans want peace, but their visions of this peace contradict one another. Some Afghans fight for equal rights, while some fight for dominance. The peace in Afghanistan might currently be as close as ever or as far away as ever.

**CHAPTER ONE:**  
**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STATE-BUILDING AND PEACEBUILDING IN**  
**AFGHANISTAN**

Since 2002, the U.S. government has justified intrusive interventions into the political, economic, and social affairs of Afghanistan under a “state-building” approach to address a combination of security and humanitarian challenges. The U.S. has promoted state-building initiatives, guided by a liberal peacebuilding ideology, to restructure the Afghan government as a step toward implementing extensive socio-economic reforms in Afghanistan (Fishstein 2015). The U.S. state-building approach has focused on constructing state institutions in accordance with a liberal template that is tasked with promoting peace, democracy, and a market-led development in the region.

Each of the presidential administrations under consideration here—George W. Bush’s, Obama’s, and Trump’s—assumed that the “threefold transformation to peace, democracy, and market economy” would be a self-strengthening process leading to the stabilization of Afghanistan (Paris 2004). However, since the beginning of the liberal peacebuilding policy’s implementation in 2004, it has been clear that the promotion of a liberal economy has undermined the promotion of peace and democracy because of its inevitable consequences: notably, social injustice and rising inequality among Afghans (Kurtenbach 2010: 95). Given the fact that most Afghans currently live in rural areas and work in agriculture, the liberalization of the Afghan economy caused the collapse of traditional agriculture and a great loss of earnings for farmers, thus increasing their dissatisfaction with the Afghan government and its foreign allies. The farmers’ dissatisfaction has allowed the Taliban to garner support among the rural residents in eastern and southern Afghanistan, effectively undermining the U.S. peacebuilding approach.

In this chapter, I address the theoretical framework for U.S. peacebuilding in Afghanistan.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and analyze the Obama and Trump administrations' concepts of peace in the context of Afghanistan. In section one, I briefly address the George W. Bush administration's strategy for winning the "War on Terror." In the second section, I explain the liberal peacebuilding theory and its characteristics. In section three, I analyze Obama's peacebuilding approaches in Afghanistan in relation to the liberal peacebuilding theory and discuss the ongoing peacebuilding efforts under President Trump, which are against the nature and principles of the liberal peacebuilding theory. In the final section, I argue that each of the presidential administrations had its own vision for how to implement state-building and peacebuilding in Afghanistan. The differences in U.S. policy toward Afghanistan created a fragile and corrupt Afghan government with a "rentier economy," which caused Afghan public to become increasingly disillusioned with the government over the liberalization of the economy and its rampant corruption.

### 1.1 The Bush Administration's Strategy for Winning the "War on Terror"

The Bush administration's declaration of war against Taliban met very little opposition among Americans, and it justified an extensive U.S. military effort against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Having already declared that he did not believe in nation-building, President Bush and his advisors ignored the systemic problems in Afghanistan and used force to unseat the Taliban. They appeared to believe that ousting the unpopular Taliban, detaining and transferring several Taliban leaders to the Guantanamo detention camp, and detaining thousands of suspected supporters of the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan would help them to bring the threat to U.S. security under control with very little expense (Anderson 2004). However, the increasing attacks on Americans in Afghanistan proved that these measures were miscalculated, largely because they did not take a balanced, multifaceted approach: politically, economically, or militarily (Garfinkle 2004).

Although the Bush administration chose to use force, from the beginning of the “War on Terror,” there were advocates of a more multilateral approach under international law (Anderson 2004). This position emphasized a limited military response and the devotion of efforts toward state-building because the appearance of Islamic fundamentalist movements was seen as an indication of complex problems which needed more resources and focus. The Bush administration initially paid little attention to this argument. However, by 2003, administration officials had to change course toward policies that utilized liberal state-building as a result of ongoing violence, the discourses embedded in the “War on Terror,” insurgency, and increasing recruitment among fundamentalist groups (Jenkins 2017).

In the Bush administration, many State Department officials, such as Christina Rocca, the head of the Bureau of South Asian Affairs, and Richard Haas, director of Policy Planning, advocated for a multifaceted state-building approach as early as late 2001. Although they “lacked the staff, the budget, and the authority” to handle issues regarding Afghanistan policies, they believed that liberal institutions would add indirectly to the goal of promoting peace by empowering their Afghan partners to create a sense of cooperation and mutual interests (Anderson 2004). According to “Accelerating Success in Afghanistan: An Assessment,” a 2004 document that was declassified in 2008, in the pursuit of state-building, the U.S. needed to create liberal entities because undemocratic regimes do not have any representative character; therefore, a new Afghan constitution was written that guaranteed equal rights to all Afghans. The memorandum states that the Afghan government, “consulting closely with the Embassy” and “International Coalition,” should extend its authority across the country to conduct elections and provide security, because successful elections will weaken the Taliban insurgency (Memorandum 0179: 2). Other liberal institutions followed, i.e., an independent Human Rights Commission, an independent Election Commission, and two chambers of parliament: the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Contemporary discourses about state-building and development represent a process of replicating Western liberalism in Afghanistan, where liberal state institutions were created to sustain the wider social, economic, and political transformation of society (Sedra 2004). Historically, Afghans have developed a different political, social, and economic background from Western civilization, and it will take a long time for the country to develop a liberal democratic culture that “genuinely underpins democratic institutions.” However, due to its dependency on foreign aid since the 2001 U.S. intervention, the Afghan government has been under constant pressure from its Western allies to produce a liberal democratic regime almost instantly (Werbner 2008: 355). Over the last 18 years, the U.S. and other Western countries have pressured the Afghan government on social and economic policies, for example, by stopping Afghanistan from buying fuel from Iran and pressuring the Afghan government to change some controversial religious laws, such as the “Shia Personal Status Law.” These interventions have created a consensus among Afghans that the Afghan government and parliament are not responding to domestic policymaking contestation (Prashad 2019). The process of state-building and liberal peacebuilding has contributed to the creation of a state that serves an externally-driven agenda, rather than one that act independently and is driven by domestic interests (Cornish 2014). Another example of these interventions is Afghanistan’s membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO). In 2015, Afghanistan, under President Ghani’s leadership, joined the WTO. Afghanistan, as a net importer, committed to reducing “fixed taxes on imports by 3%” (Momeni 2019). The Afghan government was advised by the International Monetary Fund and other international financial institutions to join the WTO to boost Afghanistan’s economy. However, the WTO agenda is to advocate for the elimination of tariffs, which, instead of helping Afghanistan, would destroy the country’s agriculture, because it would be unable to protect domestic production by imposing tariffs (Jawara and Kwa, 2004). This reality raises critical questions regarding the nature of peacebuilding

activities in Afghanistan, and in particular, whether the state-building approach has had the reverse impact on the prospects of inclusive democracy.

## 1.2 Liberal/Democratic Peace Theory

Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, introduced the liberal peace theory in his essay, “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch” in 1795. In this essay, Kant argued that there would not be any war if all states were democratic republics, because they would be interdependent economically, socially, and politically; therefore, these republics would not go to war with each other to resolve their conflicts (Kant 1795). Such states would be rational parties in the international system; hence, they would understand that if they were to go to war, they would lose opportunities of trade, which would cost them severe economic and social loss (Newman 2009; 11).

During the 1980s and 1990s, academic works published by Michael Doyle, Dean Babst, and R. J. Rummel extended Kant’s “perpetual peace” argument and applied it to the modern era to argue that democratic states do not usually fight each other; therefore, they are in “democratic peace” (Smith 2007). Most importantly, Rummel and Doyle’s works gave “empirical authority” to the liberal peace proposition by using a systematic analysis of data on interstate war (Ray 1998).

The rediscovery of Kantian democratic peace theory prompted research on the relationship between liberal democracy and internal conflict. One of the most prominent studies in this field is Rummel’s “Power Kills: Democracy as a Method of Nonviolence,” in which he argued that democracies are less likely to face violent internal issues because democratic processes of representation, negotiation, and compromise resolve violent social conflicts (Rummel 1997; 85). Further studies have supported this argument, including the comprehensive analysis of democracy and internal violence by Havard Hegre (2001), which concluded that among all of the political systems, democratic countries are the least vulnerable to internal conflict.

Hegre's approach has been adopted by scholars with extensive links to policymaking circles, such as Larry Diamond. Diamond is a vocal advocate of promoting democracy as a measure against interstate war and internal violence. He has been instrumental in promoting democracy as a vital preventive and defensive approach in national security (Paris 2004). The equation of democratization with national and international security has been essential in creating a broad consensus on the importance of democratic forms of state institutions.

These arguments are part of a longstanding tradition of in the promotion of democracy promotion by the United States government, which began with the Wilson administration. President Woodrow Wilson believed that democracy, more than any other political system, would help states to become stable and peaceful, thus creating a more peaceful international system (Smith, 2000).

In January 1918, Wilson made the "Fourteen Points" speech to Congress outlining a political doctrine that shaped American foreign policy throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His doctrine was based on the presumption that an international system should be composed of states that are created in accordance with the consent of the people, the rule of law, and market-led democracy. This system would be bound together by commercial interests and respect for international law that could bring peace to the world (Ikenberry, 2009). Wilson was the first U.S. president to push for the liberal peacebuilding theory. Although his prime concern was interstate conflict, to achieve international peace, each state needed to be internally stable and democratically represent the people. Contemporary peacebuilding approaches are based on similar assumptions, such as the belief in fostering peace by the "democratization of state institutions" and "marketization of economy" in countries that are emerging from internal conflict (Paris 2004).

There is no consensus on the definition of democracy among liberal peace supporters. Many approaches assessing democracy have been accused of "subjectivity," "ethnocentricity,"

“inconsistency,” “incomplete data,” and “bias” (Chan 1997). Democratic states are typically perceived to respond to their constituents’ demands because they receive their mandate on the basis of consent and popular legitimacy. However, many governments with different structures and political systems can be seen to be responsive to the many undemocratic demands of their constituents. The supporters of the liberal peace theory have assumed a methodical conception of democracy, including fair and competitive elections, the universal right to vote, the rule of law, independent civil society, and freedom of speech and the press (Ray 1998); such conceptions of democracy are the products of American political ideology (Chan 1997). Therefore, these values become problematic when they are applied to non-Western states that have no historical background of liberal democracy (Brown 2010). Since early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Afghans came in contact with Western way of governance, they accepted the ideology as long as it did not challenge their authority. Western democracy’s emphasis on fair and competitive elections has been problematic in Afghanistan over the last 18 years. During the 2009 presidential election, President Karzai strongly resisted the pressure of the U.S. and UN to agree to the investigation of the suspected voter and election fraud that were sending the election to a runoff. The same problem occurred in the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, invalidating more than half of the votes. One of the main reasons of voter and election fraud might be the lack of political acceptance among Afghan elites. As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt stated in *How Democracies Die*, “today’s democratic backsliding begins at the ballot boxes” when the rivals devalue fair elections by ballot-box stuffing. In the 2019 presidential election, over 900,000 of 2.1 million votes were invalidated, and the results of the election have yet to be determined because none of the candidates will accept a result that is not in their favor. Attempts by peacebuilding supporters to export political, social, and economic policies to the subject countries have faced significant resistance, resulting in the implementation of more intrusive measures. In the case of Afghanistan, this took the form of the

use of military force by the U.S. to suppress the Afghan government rivals, such as local warlords, and establish liberal democratic institutions in the country.

Several features and assumptions highlight liberal peacebuilding characteristics. First, it is presumed that they are apolitical and humanitarian while they are also driven from above, and by external actors. This assumption portrays the problem as an internal one, but the solution as external (Zambakari 2017). The second assumption is that in order to promote liberal state-building, international organizations prioritize international over local interventions in conflict-prone countries such as Afghanistan. It also pushes for top-down state-building over bottom-up approaches. The third assumption is that “what works in the West works everywhere.” This universalization of liberal ideas has prompted international organizations to adopt Western countries’ political systems and attempt to transfer them to countries with different cultural and social backgrounds (Zambakari 2017).

These assumptions of liberal peace have been internalized within the peacebuilding discourse and are more evident in the promotion of liberal institutions as a solution to all post-conflict problems in subject countries such as Afghanistan.

### 1.3 The Evolution of the Concept of Peace

After 9/11 attacks, the Bush Doctrine was shaped around three main ideas: That U.S. hegemony should remain unchallenged, that the U.S. must use pre-emptive force to deter its enemies, and if necessary, that the U.S. should act unilaterally to eliminate threats to its security. At the center of the Bush Doctrine was the “abrogation of sovereignty,” a legal framework established by the UN Security Council to permit the use of force to abolish the sovereignty of a country if it is proved that the country is a rogue states and a threat to other countries, developing and using weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), or supporting terrorism activities against other countries (Reddish et al. 2004: 11). Therefore, many liberal peacebuilding scholars rejected any comparison

between the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 and the expansion or promotion of liberal interventionism, democracy, and peacebuilding that preceded it (Dodge 2013). The main distinction between these policies is the motives that drove the Bush administration to forcefully oust the Taliban regime and the fact that this was not a response that aimed to stop a civil war or support peacebuilding. Roland Paris and Edward Newman claimed that the U.S.-led intervention was not a humanitarian intervention in response to civil war or to support a peace settlement, nor was it triggered by a request from the Afghans; therefore, the initial intervention differed profoundly from a peacebuilding approach (Newman 2009: 33). Scholars who sympathized with a humanitarian intervention saw that the justificatory rhetoric of the Bush administration undermined the norms of liberal intervention and shaped the perceptions of residents of subject countries with regard to the motives of the interveners (Weiss 2007: 142). The early reactions of Afghans to the U.S. intervention were positive because they thought that a two-decade-long civil war was going to end, but since 2003 to 2004, cynicism about the U.S. presence has drastically increased among Afghans (Jones 2008).

The ideological convictions of those who ordered the US intervention in Afghanistan are clear, but the illegitimacy of the Taliban in the eyes of the world due to the human rights abuses they had committed warranted their forceful removal; thus, the U.S. justified ousting the Taliban in the name of liberating the Afghans. The promotion of a neoliberal reform of state was portrayed by the Bush administration as needed to preserve the liberation (Dodge 2009). However, beyond the initial motives for U.S. intervention, which were to oust the Taliban from power and kill or capture the leaders of Al Qaeda, liberal peace theory shaped the Bush and Obama administrations' peacebuilding approaches to stabilizing Afghanistan after the Taliban had been removed by military action.

Roland Paris acknowledged that US efforts to stabilize Afghanistan after 2003 resembled

the United Nations and other international agencies' liberal peacebuilding approaches in other post-conflict countries (2009: 105). Michael Ignatieff considered the U.S.-led intervention to be an imperialist act that imposed Western concepts of democracy and sustainable self-governance on Afghanistan. Other scholars, including Robert Muggah, referred to the intervention in Afghanistan as a stabilization mission (2003: 23).

Importantly, several American foreign policy think tanks, such as the RAND Corporation, claimed that, after 9/11, the U.S., as the only world superpower, had a responsibility to transform the international system through intervention and state-building to bring “more fundamental transformation” to conflict-prone countries (Dobbins et al. 2003). This narrative was part of a sustained attempt to persuade the unwilling Bush administration to transform the international system by applying liberal peacebuilding methods to post-regime-change countries, such as Afghanistan. The effort was needed because prominent neoconservative policymakers in the Bush administration, including Paul Wolfowitz, Elliott Abrams, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, had previously distanced themselves from liberal approaches to reconstructing post-regime-change Afghanistan. Bush's foreign policy team refused to commit to liberal peacebuilding in Afghanistan until 2003 (Dodge 2013).

The planning of the invasion of Afghanistan was based on the assumption that US troops would leave Afghanistan as soon as the Taliban and Al Qaeda were removed from power (Jones 2009: 112). The initial policy was narrow: it was a “capture or kill” approach that worked against liberal peacebuilding theories (Woodward 2011: 191). The hostility towards liberal peace is clear in the US policies in Afghanistan between late 2001 and June 2003. The U.S. committed a minimum of resources to Afghanistan. During its first four months from December 2001 to March 2002, for example, the newly created Afghan provisional government under Hamid Karzai did not have the budget to pay its civil service employees and police officers (Rashid 2008: 63)

The minimalist approach of the U.S. to governing post-Taliban Afghanistan was supported by the United Nations, and especially by Lakhadar Brahimi, the UN special envoy in Kabul. Brahimi believed that a heavy international presence in the country would be harmful to political stabilization. Instead, he advocated a “light footprint” approach with a focus on programs that were conducive to capacity building among Afghans (Suhrke 2011: 30). As this antipathy toward a comprehensive form of liberal peacebuilding was shaped, the first policy that the US sought to apply in Afghanistan was disintegrating (Dodge 2010: 1278).

For many scholars, the motives behind the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan were fundamentally different to the concept of liberal intervention. Additionally, the Taliban was, at the time of the U.S.-led intervention, past the peak of its human rights abuses, therefore the intervention could not be justified as a humanitarian approach to build a liberal peace. The initial planning of the Bush administration, to withdraw US troops as soon as possible, appeared to highlight this. President Bush and his top foreign policy advisors, Donald Rumsfeld and Condoleezza Rice, rejected any attempt to include liberal peacebuilding in pre-invasion policymaking. However, when their pre-invasion plan came face to face with on-the-ground realities, they soon came to the realization that they needed to quickly adopt liberal peacebuilding methods to bring stability to Afghanistan so that they could victoriously withdraw their troops.

### 1.3.1 The Application of the Liberal Peace

In mid-2003, the U.S. policy towards Afghanistan drastically shifted to liberal peacebuilding oriented around neoliberalism. To transform the Afghan state's relationship with its constituents, the U.S. government's efforts were aimed at four main units of analysis: the individual, the market, the state, and democracy (Starr 2004). By the end of 2002, officials in Washington were receiving regular briefings indicating that their pre-invasion planning was failing. A new policy was adopted in December 2002, although it took several months—until June 2003 at

the earliest—for the U.S. to reorient its policies. Bush administration officials believed that the dominance of the newly created Afghan government by the Northern Alliance, composed of non-Pashtun, re-empowered warlords, had alienated key parts of Afghan society and had become a hurdle to constructing liberal institutions (Sanger 2007). President Bush tasked Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-American diplomat and key advisor to the National Security Council on Afghan policy, to work on the implementation of a new liberalization policy. Khalilzad was a highly influential figure in US-Afghanistan policy because of his ideological connections to Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz, and President Bush. Khalilzad was also a lifelong strategist of American hard power with personal ties to the republican neoconservative movement. At the University of Chicago, he and Wolfowitz completed their doctorate degrees under the supervision of Albert Wohlstetter, a neoconservative theorist who believed that deterrence theory had made the U.S. weak and pushed for arms buildups (Hirsh 2019). In 1984, Khalilzad worked with Wolfowitz, then the director of Policy Planning, at the State Department. In 1992, when Wolfowitz was appointed as the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, Khalilzad joined him and helped him to draft his “Wolfowitz Doctrine,” which advocated for the U.S. to use all means necessary to “prevent the rise of any nation” that challenged U.S. hegemony. Khalilzad also served as a senior political analyst at the RAND Corporation during the Clinton administration. He was one of the signatories of the neoconservative strategists’ 1998 open letter to the Clinton administration to actively seek “political and military strategies” to overthrow the Iraqi regime under the leadership of Saddam Hussein; other notable signatories were Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and John Bolton (Nashashibi 2003).

In June 2003, the National Security Council passed a new policy called “Accelerating Success.” Recognizing previous policy failures, President Bush appointed Khalilzad as U.S. Ambassador to Kabul and his special envoy. According to Rohde and Sanger, Khalilzad was

fortified by a great increase in U.S. resources and commitments for Afghanistan to implement the key policy goals supported by the core concepts of liberal peacebuilding.

Khalilzad helped to draft the “Accelerating Success” policy and was trusted to implement it. He incorporated the four neoliberal units of analysis—political, institutional, economic, and coercive—into the “Accelerating Success” policy (Starr 2004: 9). The initiative had four main objectives: firstly, to develop inclusive Afghan institutions by creating an ethnic balance in the staffing of all ministries; secondly, to establish a new Afghan National Army to be used to remove the central government’s local rivals; thirdly, to strengthen the capacities of the Afghan government, and fourthly, to accelerate the economic and social reconstruction of Afghanistan (Starr 2004: 7). In the political aspect, the aim was to give the new Afghan ruling elite legitimacy and simultaneously set constraints on their actions by “holding elections” as soon as it was possible logistically. The plan was to enhance the legitimacy of the Afghan government by sharing power among different Afghan ethnic and religious groups; therefore, all Afghan ministries would be staffed according to the ethnic composition of the country. Institutionally, Khalilzad claimed the objective was to enable the Afghans to put an effective government in place by promoting and constructing Western modeled liberal institutions. Economically, the new policy emphasized the liberalization of markets in the name of improving the Afghans’ quality of life. In 2004, Khalilzad stated that the U.S. focus was to develop a private sector-led open market in Afghanistan. Finally, the policy advocated creating a strong Afghan coercive force so that it could bring stability and implement the rule of law across the territory of Afghanistan. This included the creation of a new Afghan National Army that had been trained and equipped by the U.S. and its Western allies (Khalilzad 2004). The implementation of “Accelerating Success” was the end of the UN commitment to a “light footprint” approach.

In October 2003, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1510, highlighting the

importance of extending the authority of the Afghan government to all parts of Afghanistan. The resolution also authorized the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to expand its operations countrywide. The ISAF was tasked with creating a “secure environment to facilitate reconstruction” and help to “lay foundations for a peaceful new order” (Suhrke 2007: 85). The United Nations Security Council tasked the ISAF with actively participating in disarming the local warlords through a disarmament, demobilization, and reconstruction (DDR) program. The ISAF and U.S. Army created Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) to train and assess the Afghan police and army.

The U.S. civilian officials and military commanders in Afghanistan pressured the Bush administration to commit to a comprehensive strategy by doubling the US troops in the country in addition to increasing its financial obligation to achieve the ambitious liberal peacebuilding agenda at the heart of “Accelerating Success.” In 2004, the U.S. spent \$1.9 billion on reconstituting liberal institutions and capacity building in the Afghan government (Rashid 2009: 189). However, most of the money allocated by the U.S. Congress was to be used on U.S. troops and contractors and their accommodation. In November 2003, Congress gave \$87 billion to the Bush administration to spend on the war in Afghanistan, but only \$11 billion was spent on Afghanistan reconstruction (Sample 2003). Most of this reconstruction aid was devoted to building roads, bridges, and airports to help the U.S. and Afghan forces access rural areas, but due to rampant corruption in international and Afghan agencies, these projects were of very low quality. Many schools and hospitals were also built with this financial aid.

In December 2009, the Obama administration reviewed its own policy on Afghanistan by sending more U.S. troops and resources to the country (Dodge 2011). Obama’s Afghan policy extended its commitment to spend more money on state-building. In the 2012 fiscal year, the Department of Defense asked the Congress to allocate \$107.3 billion to the Afghan war effort, and

the Department of State requested \$4.3 billion, while in 2005, these figures were \$17.2 billion for Defense, and \$2.8 billion for State (Livingston 2014).

### 1.3.2 The Nature of the Afghan State

From the beginning of the implementation of “Accelerating Success,” the nature of the Afghan state was at the heart of the policy’s objectives. Khalilzad’s main concern was the lack of coercive power in the Afghan government, which was unable to impose order and guarantee the rule of law across the country due to local warlords’ challenges to the central government’s authority in rural areas. The Afghan central government had neither financial and human capacity in civilian agencies, nor the powerful coercive forces to extend its authority to all territory of the country. To address these challenges, the U.S. tried to create highly centralized state institutions in Afghanistan, which resulted in a semi-despotic regime under the President, with few checks and balances in place. The Obama administration’s policy also followed the “Accelerating Success” plan by aiming to improve the Kabul government’s institutional capacity so that reconstruction could be rolled out from Kabul to rural areas, and the development of rural areas could increase the Afghan government’s legitimacy among its constituents. The U.S. policies were urban-focused because urban areas tend to promote a liberal ideology as opposed to the traditional customs that are stronger in rural areas. This ambiguous ambition underestimated both the lack of expertise in Afghan society and the lack of commitment from the international community that was needed to improve the lives of rural residents. According to a report by the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the U.S. failed to monitor the non-governmental, governmental, and international organizations that received U.S. funding to ensure that their actions in delivering reconstruction and development aid met quality standards.

## 1.4 Conclusion

In post-Taliban Afghanistan, U.S.-led attempts at creating a strong centralized state in Kabul to guarantee the rule of law have made little progress. The Kabul administration's corruption is too deep to root out. American policymakers in the Trump era have already given up on their Afghan partners. As a consequence of the highly centralized government, Afghan civilian institutions are largely centered in the country's large cities. The judiciary and law enforcement agencies are absent in rural areas because of the Taliban resurgence, which undermines the state's legitimacy among locals. According to the World Bank, almost 73% of Afghans live in rural areas and mostly work in agriculture.

The economic policies promoted by the US and international organizations resulted in the liberalization of the economy and the disempowerment of Afghan rural residents. These policies placed Afghanistan at the mercy of the international monetary agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Islamic Development Bank, and U.S. aid agencies, and did not help to empower an indigenous bourgeoisie. According to Florian Kuehn (2010), foreign direct investment has been limited to the "rentier sector" of the economy, such as minerals and mining. This has caused rampant state corruption and the detachment of the state from Afghan society (Mojumdar 2010). The electoral system promoted by Khalilzad as a means of constraining the governing elite has been disastrous. The contentious presidential elections in 2009, 2014, and 2019 created grievances among Afghans and demonstrated to them that holding elections will not help the country to create a stable government. The creation and performance of a national unity government after the disastrous 2014 presidential election has weakened Afghan democracy to the point of non-existence (Rahyab 2019). Since the 2009 presidential election, the political leaders in Afghanistan, and especially Presidents Karzai and Ghani, have turned Afghanistan's limited democracy into an authoritarian regime. They have weakened democratic

institutions by interfering in the Electoral Commission and curtailing the legitimate protests of their opponents. The U.S. supports these despotic leaders because they do not object to the U.S. policies. As a result of the election fraud, electoral participation has drastically dropped, thus undermining the credibility of the elections and the legitimacy of the Afghan government.

The only area in which the US-led intervention has met with some success is in the expansion of the state's coercive power, whereby the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police have grown, employing approximately 350,000. However, the cost of maintaining the Afghan armed forces is estimated to be approximately \$8 billion per year, which further highlights Afghanistan's dependence on foreign countries, especially the U.S. (SIGAR 2018). This coercive power gives the Afghan government the despotic strength to suppress any objection to its governing elite's interests.

Eighteen years after the Taliban was ousted, Afghanistan is still a rentier state; international donors contribute to 66 % of its regular budget (Bjelica and Ruttig 2018). Afghans experience pervasive corruption in every aspect of the state's interaction with society. In 2010, Integrity Watch Afghanistan conducted a survey that concluded that Afghans had to pay bribes to access government services and that corruption had doubled since 2007 (Mojumdar 2010). In 2019, Transparency International ranked Afghanistan 172<sup>nd</sup> out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index. These figures illustrate Afghans' disillusionment with their government and its foreign allies. The liberal state-building process has promoted a centralized government under the leadership of a president who has been given more power than a king by the constitution. The liberal institutions, such as the Electoral Commission, that were supposed to constrain corrupt leaders are ineffective and at the heart of a major crisis. Given the widespread corruption in the Afghan governing elite, it is hardly surprising to witness an increasing number of rural revolts against the Kabul administration.

## **CHAPTER TWO: PEACEBUILDING THROUGH COERCION**

The United States' foreign policy toward Afghanistan is best understood as an extension of its foreign policy priorities. These priorities, as Roger Hilsman, Isaiah Wilson, and Roger George have shown, have been built to amplify the United States' coercive power. Indeed, these scholars, among many, describe the U.S. military establishment as “extremely conservative,” “nationalistic,” “aggressive”, and “power-oriented.” They argue that the U.S. military establishment's culture is shaped around violence and warfare, and that military officers must have these special skills to be successful (Hilsman 1990: 203). To comply with this agenda, military personnel have strict chains of command and an uncompromising set of cultural and behavioral norms (George 2017). As a result, the U.S. soldiers and civilian officials at the Department of Defense (DoD) deal with foreign policy issues with military and combat-oriented perspective. This has been encapsulated in U.S.-Afghanistan foreign policy.

This chapter addresses the U.S. military campaigns in Afghanistan under three presidents: George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. Despite their drastic differences in rhetoric and style, these presidents share many similarities in terms of their policies of using coercive power to build peace in Afghanistan. In the first section of this chapter, I briefly address the military establishment's central position on the Bush administration's global “War on Terror.” In the second section, I analyze the U.S. military campaign and its evolution under the Obama administration, as well as the Obama administration's modifications to the counterinsurgency policy. In the third section, I focus on the U.S. military campaign in the Trump era, which has shown a reversal of Obama's policy and a continuation of Bush's policy. In the final section, I conclude by highlighting the military establishment's importance in foreign policy decision-making in the U.S. and the effect of U.S. military involvement in state-building in Afghanistan.

### 2.1.1 Bush's "War on Terror"

Bush's strategy in the "War on Terror" was not a clearly articulated policy. Rather, it was designed to mobilize Americans and obtain formal authorization from Congress to use force against the suspected organizers of the 9/11 attacks. It was a declaration of war, in which the goal was not simply to punish terrorists but to destroy them. The officials who were close to the military establishment—especially Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, his deputy Paul Wolfowitz, and Newt Gingrich, a member of Rumsfeld's Defense Policy Board—were central to the decision-making and execution of this strategy, advocating for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan after removal of the Taliban from power (Draper 2007). These officials claimed that there was not enough "good targets" in Afghanistan but that the U.S. could find "a lot of good targets in Iraq" (Hirsh 2019). Once it had become clear that the Taliban would refuse to comply with the demand to "hand over the terrorists," the U.S. military launched "Operation Enduring Freedom" in October 2001. In the early stage of this operation, only CIA officers and special forces were deployed to establish targets for aerial bombing and also to assist the Northern Alliance, a loose alliance between anti-Taliban warlords, in capturing several key cities from the Taliban (Tenet 2007: 175).

Several key warlords in the Northern Alliance were bribed with money and weapons by the CIA to fight for the U.S. cause because the military establishment was refusing to commit a large number of U.S. troops. The U.S. adopted a strategy of deploying minimal ground troops. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, supported by his fellow neoconservatives, believed that a large conventional force was not in the interest of the U.S.; instead, using local forces loyal to the U.S. with aerial support was deemed to be sufficient to remove the Taliban from power (Wawro 2010: 494). The military establishment believed that the U.S. should do "something that counts," but "bombing some caves" in Afghanistan would not demonstrate the full power of the U.S. (Gingrich

2001). It is clear that the primary objectives of the “Operation Enduring Freedom” were to remove the Taliban and to capture Osama bin Laden and other key leaders of Al Qaeda as quickly as possible. The military establishment did not have any plan for a prolonged war in Afghanistan. During the planning of the invasion, President Bush gave broad power to the DoD and CIA to manage the invasion (Woodward 2011: 102). As Rumsfeld claimed, “the top priority” was to disable Al Qaeda and capture its leaders. The CIA Director, George Tenet, also emphasized that the U.S. was “not going to occupy” Afghanistan. Based on the DoD officials’ statements, the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan was supposed to be a first step in punishing rogue states.

Meanwhile, civilian agencies, including the State Department, raised several reservations regarding the excessive use of force, especially in aerial bombings, which resulted in civilian casualties and massive internal displacement in Afghanistan. However, the military establishment had the power to dismiss such reservations through the National Security Council (Jenkins 2017). The pentagon advocated for a military solution and ignored Afghanistan’s political and economic problems. Thus, the military establishment was able to overshadow civilian agencies and their efforts to curb the militarization of U.S. diplomacy.

After 9/11, the DoD allowed Department of State to work on creating an international consensus to invade Afghanistan but prevented it from interfering with its invasion strategy (Rashid 2009). From the perspective of the military establishment, the creation of an international coalition would help to legitimize the invasion. Similarly, the United Nations Security Council’s approval was only appropriate as long as it was not interfering with the U.S.’ right to use military force. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld could not have been clearer when he announced that “the mission determines the coalition. The coalition must not determine the mission” (Bennis 2002: 82).

The military establishment unilaterally planned the invasion. As a consequence, the international community refused to participate in the aerial bombing campaign. Despite this, the

US military falsely claimed that the aerial bombing campaign produced an impressive display of technology and firepower and that it thus effectively and efficiently destroyed all of the enemy's strategic military strongholds while avoiding civilian casualties (Bennis 2001).

While the U.S. military concentrated its resources on the bombardment of the country, the aid that it provided to the Afghans was insufficient. After the international media reported that the aerial bombing campaign had caused a high number of civilian casualties and created massive internal displacement, the White House pressured the military establishment to modify its invasion strategy, which was later named "Accelerating Success." In response to the critics, the U.S. military dropped approximately one million packages of food from airplanes across Afghanistan, but this operation was also criticized for being expensive and unproductive as the packages of food had the same color as cluster bombs: yellow (Bennis 2010).

#### 2.1.2 "Accelerating Success": A Step Toward State-Building

In 2004, following the emergence of a Taliban-led insurgency, the White House recognized that it needed to commit more resources beyond simple combat operations. Even after the White House's policy shift, the military establishment was reluctant to participate in state-building in Afghanistan (Mann 2004). The military perceived little value in the War in Afghanistan and considered it to be a warmup battle for more complicated battles in the global "War on Terror." Even some State Department officials argued against "dispensing more efforts in stabilizing operations" in Afghanistan because they viewed state-building as a distraction from the primary mission of killing terrorists (Keane 2016: 50). The military establishment considered the state-building secondary in importance to removing the Taliban and dismantling Al Qaeda. Instead of supporting state-building in Afghanistan, the U.S. military preferred to focus on consolidating its presence in the region (Dobbins 2008).

The military leadership soon found that their military counterinsurgency strategy required a

more reliable local partner, so that once they had cleared one area of insurgents, the local forces (i.e., the Afghan police and army) could prevent the insurgents from recapturing that area. Therefore, the U.S. military initiated a new policy, “Accelerating Success,” that gave it the tools and state-building rhetoric to create local forces that could help the U.S. military establishment to win the war. The significance of state-building, especially the coercive parts of the Afghan government, was reiterated by the Pentagon until early 2019.

In 2006, Robert Gates replaced Rumsfeld as Defense Secretary and incorporated state-building into the U.S. military agenda in Afghanistan. He argued that the military should take the initiative in promoting good governance and reconstruction in Afghanistan’s rural areas (Bacevich 2008). The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review suggested that military officers should collaborate with civilian agencies to promote good governance and reconstruction projects. Despite this apparent display of interest in state-building, warfare continued to be the military’s main concern (Dobbins 2008). Beyond the rhetoric of good governance and reconstruction, the military strategy was to use a state-building approach to create a reliable force among Afghans so that the Afghans could perform labor, in substitute of American soldiers, during combat operations (Bacevich 2010: 201).

In response to the increasing insurgency, the U.S.-led ISAF expanded its operations from Kabul to distant provinces. The ISAF’s priority was to “protect Afghan civilians,” “kill or capture insurgent leaders,” and “establish local government to enforce law and order” (Keane 2016: 60). Many military leaders, such as General David Petraeus, General Stanley McChrystal, and Karl Eikenberry, believed the approach would help the military leadership to gain a better understanding of the conflict and violence in Afghanistan (Eikenberry 2013). Many scholars, such as Andrew Bacevich and Connor Keane, have claimed that this counter insurgency approach failed in Afghanistan because it did not consider the internal dynamics of the country. Many Afghans

perceived this approach as a coercive state-building that misguidedly offered a military solution to a complex conflict. This approach failed to ensure developments that would benefit Afghans in rural areas, but it expected the Afghans to accept the military occupation (Gentile 2013).

U.S. agencies disagreed on the priorities of the counterinsurgency policy and how it could contribute to state-building in Afghanistan. On the one hand, many military officials, like Rumsfeld, persistently argued their initial stand that the state-building was a distraction from the military's core objective, which was to kill and capture Al Qaeda and Taliban leaders. On the other hand, many other military officials, like Petraeus and McChrystal, argued that the U.S. military should spearhead state-building through counterinsurgency. Meanwhile, the U.S. civilian agencies, especially the State Department and USAID, challenged the entire counterinsurgency strategy and demanded more funding and resources for the civilian agencies that were operating in Afghanistan (Girardet 2011: 382).

### 2.2.1 Obama's "Good War"

As a senator and later a presidential candidate, Obama supported the War in Afghanistan, unlike the war in Iraq. He criticized the war in Iraq as a "dumb war" while calling the US military campaign in Afghanistan a war of necessity because the Taliban were harboring Al Qaeda terrorists who had attacked the U.S. The vocally antiwar presidential candidate of 2008, Obama, committed to sending more troops to Afghanistan if he was elected president (Landler 2017).

Late in his second term, President Obama, although defensive of his accomplishments, conceded that the longest US military campaign in the country's history would not end under his leadership (Cordesman 2016: 7). In late summer 2015, Obama's optimism that the War in Afghanistan was "winnable" had changed to the bitter experience that democracy could not be exported (Landler 2017). It was an important turning point in U.S. policymaking about Afghanistan.

The War in Afghanistan had changed President Obama's views on war and the use of military power. Under the Obama administration, the US military became more attracted to the power of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in counterinsurgency strategy. As a president, Obama was reluctant to use large-scale ground forces, and argued with his generals over U.S. intervention in other parts of the world, such as Syria, Iraq, and Libya, constantly leaning toward minimalist military options. However, Obama's strategy in Afghanistan was unique because he chose to send more troops to the country without planning for a long-term occupation but to end the war quickly by defeating the Taliban.

Soon after taking office, Obama launched a comprehensive strategy to end the Afghan insurgency by addressing the problems that had been ignored by previous administrations: firstly, by restoring political stability through empowering Afghans; secondly, by sending thousands of additional troops to Afghanistan; and thirdly, by creating a schedule for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan (Indurthy 2011: 12).

### 2.2.2 New Strategy: A Fragile Progress

When President Obama entered the White House, he quickly ordered a policy review to replace the phrase global "War on Terror" with "Countering Violent Extremism" (Jenkins 2017). Operationally, there were few differences between the two policies when they came to be applied on-the-ground.

President Obama was skeptical about the efficiency of the US military's approach to counterinsurgency in Afghanistan under the Bush administration (Landler 2017). In January 2009, when Obama assumed office, Taliban attacks had spread to 33 out of 34 Afghan provinces. The Taliban's suicide bomber attacks were becoming increasingly frequent in the capital, Kabul, and in other important city centers. In the same month of January, the president appointed Richard Holbrook, a well-known diplomat, as his special envoy to Afghanistan. Obama's objective in

appointing Holbrook was to have an envoy with high authority to coordinate an intra-agency approach to addressing the socio-economic problems of Afghanistan while the military campaign against the Taliban insurgency continued (Indurthy 2011: 15).

In March 2009, the Obama administration announced a “comprehensive strategy” to deal with the escalating insurgency by the Taliban. Based on the new strategy, the US military deployed 25,000 additional troops, 4,000 of whom were to train the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police. The administration hoped that this new strategy would curb the increasing violence in Afghanistan by showing that the war was now a high priority of the US.

In June 2009, the Obama administration changed military leadership by replacing General McKiernan with Lt. General Stanley McChrystal, who was credited, as a U.S. special operations commander between 2003 and 2008, for reducing violence in Iraq. Once he arrived in Afghanistan, McChrystal requested another 44,000 U.S. troops to combat the Taliban insurgency and to prevent a “mission failure” (Mullen 2009: 130). However, the Obama administration was skeptical about the efficiency of sending more troops to Afghanistan. Officials, including Vice President Joseph Biden, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, and the National Security Advisor, and General James L. Jones, were initially against sending more troops. They claimed that sending more troops would be expensive and that the U.S. military already had more than 70,000 troops in Afghanistan, which they considered to be sufficient to stop Taliban violence (Indurthy 2011: 16). However, after months of high-level meetings between civilian and Pentagon officials, in December 2009, President Obama announced his second strategy with regard to Afghanistan, which included sending 30,000 additional troops to the country. In the new strategy, the US military’s main goal was to protect Afghans and help the Afghan government to gain its constituents’ trust so that it could eventually fight the Taliban insurgency without U.S. support. The strategy proposed a withdrawal plan for US troops that was set to begin in July 2011 (Baker 2009).

In June 2010, Rolling Stone magazine published an article quoting McChrystal and his aides' sarcastic comments about the Obama administration's officials. Obama immediately fired General McChrystal and appointed General David Petraeus, the head of US central command, as commander of the U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Like McChrystal, Petraeus had been credited for reducing violence and insurgency in Iraq.

During his commandership, General Petraeus pressured the Afghan government not to object to the establishment of "local defense forces," local militia groups that were created by the U.S. to control the remote areas of Afghanistan. The U.S. effectively created a parallel force to the Afghan government forces in rural areas (Ruben 2010). By August 2010, the U.S. and its Western allies had started to turn some of the security duties over to the Afghan forces in the areas that were cleared of insurgents. The strategy was to allow the U.S.-sponsored militia groups to take over the remote areas where the government forces were insufficient to control. According to a leaked U.S. Embassy cable, the U.S. military had knowingly supported Afghan militias since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion. The U.S. military and CIA recognized the militias to be capable of protecting local communities against Taliban insurgency. The main claim of the U.S. Army had been that it was using the militias because of their "indigenous security capability" to win the "hearts and minds" of local communities (Dirkx 2018). However, this strategy was ineffective, because many local militia groups were created by local warlords in order to obtain financial and military assistance from the US. These groups exacerbated the insecurity in the areas that they controlled and committed human rights abuses against local people.

In August 2010, the Obama administration approved the deployment of 30,000 additional troops, increasing the U.S. troop strength to 100,000 in Afghanistan, with the support of a NATO force of 50,000. As in previous years, most of the casualties of the war were the Taliban fighters, but there were many civilians and children among the collateral victims. The Taliban used civilian

casualties to boost its propaganda machine, portraying the U.S.-led forces as the killers of civilians, even though 61% of civilian casualties were caused by Taliban terrorist attacks, while only 20% were from the operations of Afghan government forces or US forces. Although the Taliban initially opposed photography, television, and the internet, arguing that they were forbidden by Sharia Law, over the past 18 years, the group has created a sophisticated propaganda machine, including the use of social media accounts on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, and smartphone messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Viber, and Telegram. However, most importantly, the Taliban has disseminated its propaganda through mosques to recruit and alter public opinion (Bashir 2017).

The Taliban's messages are focused on the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan, corruption in the Afghan government, and the Taliban's victories on the battlefield. This propaganda is carefully directed toward rural residents who do not have another source of information besides the mullah of their local mosque, the most trusted person in a village. As a result of this propaganda, Afghans have become increasingly disillusioned with the government and its foreign allies (Indurthy 2011).

### 2.2.3 The War in Afghanistan: A Black Hole

By the end of his second term, Obama's goal to end the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan while avoiding defeat seemed impossible. A majority of Americans viewed the U.S. War in Afghanistan as a "black hole," endlessly consuming lives and money with no result in sight. For many Americans, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the removal of the Taliban was morally justifiable, but the return of the Taliban to power called into question all of the losses that the U.S. had suffered (Jenkins 2017). When the situation worsened in Afghanistan because of increases in insurgent attacks, Obama chose to send more troops while simultaneously announcing a timetable to withdraw all troops, which he later had to abandon. Obama abandoned the prospect of total withdrawal under pressure from the military establishment and Congress but pushed for the withdrawal of most of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan (Ernst 2015). Congress was concerned that

if the U.S. left Afghanistan without a victory, they might see a public backlash over spending billions of dollars in Afghanistan without being able to defeat the Taliban. By the end of Obama's term, the number of U.S. forces in Afghanistan had dropped to 8,400. At the same time, most of the U.S. allies, such as France, Canada, Italy, and the U.K., withdrew their forces from Afghanistan.

Although the Obama administration was reluctant to commit more ground forces, it willingly used UAVs to kill suspected terrorists. During the Obama tenure, the so-called targeted killings of terrorist leaders increased dramatically to —563 strikes—10 times more than under the Bush presidency (Serle 2017). The Obama administration refocused the U.S. counterterrorism strategy to a combination of special operations and airstrikes by UAVs.

Unlike Bush, Obama considered the primary U.S. mission to be to deliver democracy to the world, with greater emphasis on human rights. He claimed that the root of terrorism is poverty, bad governance, and oppression (Jenkins 2017). Therefore, his policies in the Middle East were focused on eliminating people's major grievance, which was the U.S. support for dictatorial regimes. In Afghanistan, the administration pressured the Karzai government to fight corruption and mismanagement and also stressed fair elections as a means of constraining Afghan leaders and keeping them from becoming despotic.

Although Obama continued Bush's war, he reversed some of his predecessor's policies; for example, he banned the use of brutal interrogation techniques. Obama also sought to close the infamous Guantanamo Bay detention camp. He was unsuccessful in closing the camp but managed to reduce the number of prisoners held there (Bruck 2016). Several factors played a key role in Obama's failure to close Guantanamo Bay, most notable of which was the opposition of the DoD, which claimed that the prisoners were a threat to the national security of the U.S. Other factors included the opposition of Congress and the lack of interest among foreign countries to receive their imprisoned citizens. The Obama administration pressured those countries to accept their

citizens, but the U.S. had concerns regarding the suspicion that some countries might torture and kill the prisoners once they received them; for instance, several Uighurs remain detained in Guantanamo because they cannot be repatriated to China, fearing the Chinese government may hang them. Despite the rhetoric that President Obama used during his candidacy and presidency, he did not revoke the executive orders issued by his predecessor that infringed on basic human rights, including the order to permit the indefinite detention of a suspect of terrorism, that applied to both U.S. and non-U.S. citizens (Jenkins 2017).

### 2.3.1 Trump's Strategy: Reversal or Continuity?

When Donald Trump was inaugurated as president, he seemed determined to end the longest war in U.S. history. Unlike Obama, Trump, as a presidential candidate, was critical of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. On the campaign trail, Trump repeatedly called invading Afghanistan a “terrible mistake” because it was “a complete waste of lives and money” (Johnson 2017). However, once he took office as the president, he chose to send 3,500 additional troops to Afghanistan. He also claimed that he was “a problem-solver” and promised that the U.S. would achieve victory in Afghanistan (Tellis 2017). However, Rex Tillerson, then Secretary of State, offered a different perspective, suggesting that the effort was intended to put pressure on the Taliban, “to have the Taliban understand that you will not win a battlefield victory,” so that they would come to the negotiating table with minimal bargaining power (Ward 2017).

President Trump inherited a failed counterinsurgency strategy that was focused on state-building, especially building up Afghan security forces. His predecessor's strategy of totally withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan by 2014 failed due to severe resistance from the military establishment and Congress. Trump campaigned on the promise of going after ISIS in Iraq as well as Syria and “bombing the shit out of them,” the importance of Afghanistan was downgraded to a few mentions on the president's Twitter feed (Jenkins 2017).

While President Obama limited the extent of the use of military power, Trump has sought to show his support for the military to broaden his political base among Americans. Under his leadership, the rules that restricted military commanders during the Obama administration have been removed. Military leaders have been given more freedom to use force, specifically in bombing suspected areas. Since Trump became president, bombings by the U.S. have increased and resulted in increases in civilian casualties. In October 2019, a UN report claimed that U.S. and Afghan government forces' operations had resulted in the death of 717 and wounding of 680 civilians (a 31% rise from 2018), while the civilian casualties from Taliban attacks had fallen by 43% since 2018 to 531 dead and 1,447 injured (Gannon 2019).

In contrast to his predecessor, President Trump has demonstrated his disinterest in the promotion of democracy and human rights. During his campaign, he promised to keep the Guantanamo Bay detention camp open and to "load it up with bad dudes" (Savage 2018). He claimed that "torture works" and showed his support for the use of waterboarding and other torture techniques (Harris 2017). As a president-elect, Trump said that he would not hesitate to target the families of suspected terrorists, but once he took office, he did not repeat this unprecedented threat (Jenkins 2017).

The overall pattern of Trump's conflicting rhetoric, as a candidate and then as a president, has not changed much. He has emphasized the US military power but withdrew US troops from Syria. He has proposed counterterrorism measures that, in nature, are violations of US and international law (Jenkins 2017). Since Trump took office, there has been a sharp departure from the Obama counterinsurgency and state-building in Afghanistan, but in several aspects, Trump's strategy looks similar to Bush's counterterrorism policy.

### 2.3.2 Trump's Least Bad Option

Despite the challenges in Afghanistan, the country has lost its place as a US national security priority (Egger 2017: 4). Since taking office, President Trump has not visited Afghanistan. Until recently, he rarely mentioned the conflict and the country. It was more obvious during the confirmation hearing of the national security cabinet nominees that Afghanistan is no longer a priority for US policymakers because they hardly asked any question about Afghanistan (Egger 2017: 5).

On August 21, 2017, President Trump provided a basic outline of his policy toward Afghanistan. Trump's new strategy encompassed Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and extended into Southeast Asia (Garamone 2017). He criticized his predecessors' attempts to 'rebuild a country in our own image' by sacrificing the lives of Americans and spending 'too much time, energy, and money' (White House 2017). He proposed that the US should only pursue its own 'security interests' instead of nation-building in Afghanistan (Borger 2017).

President Trump reluctantly ordered the deployment of 3,500 additional troops to Afghanistan after a "comprehensive review of all strategic options" in Afghanistan had been performed by Secretary of Defense James Mattis (White House 2017). President Trump's decision to maintain a military presence in Afghanistan and send reinforcements to the country was not a strategy for victory (Brown 2017: 1); it was merely a strategy to buy time and hope that increasing aerial bombing and special forces operations would eventually force the Taliban to the negotiating table (Brown 2017: 2). However, this seemed unlikely unless Washington was to remove all pre-negotiation conditions for the Taliban that had been set by previous administrations (e.g., that the Taliban end its relationships with international terrorist groups, such as Al Qaeda), accepting Afghanistan's constitution and, therefore, the Afghan government as the legitimate representative of the people of Afghanistan.

Desperate to fulfill his campaign promise, Trump gave the military permission to force the Taliban to the negotiating table. Trump scratched the state-building strategy in Afghanistan and returned to Bush's early strategy of killing terrorists (Brown 2017: 3). At the same time, he appointed Zalmay Khalilzad as his special envoy to Afghanistan to begin unconditional rounds of talks with the Taliban in Doha, Qatar. Zalmay Khalilzad has been a key figure in U.S.-Afghanistan policy since the Reagan administration. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Khalilzad advocated that the U.S. arm the Mujahedeen. He has also maintained connections with some of the Taliban leadership since the late 1990s, when he was lobbying for the Unocal oil company to build a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan across Afghanistan to India (Nashashibi 2003).

### 2.3.3 The Flaw in Trump's Strategy

President Trump rejected the policy of state-building and downgraded the importance of the Afghan government in his strategy, which was a critical flaw (Barber 2017). Many of Trump's allies, including Senator Lindsey Graham and John Bolton, former National Security Advisor, have argued that the U.S. has not achieved any result from negotiating with the Taliban because the group is not a reliable party in peace talks, and the U.S. should continue to support the Afghan government to make it a reliable partner. Trump has insisted that the U.S. should stop wasting money and resources in "exporting democracy" (Brown 2017: 3). Nonetheless, without investment in good governance in Afghanistan, the U.S. achievements in Afghanistan—such as achieving equal rights for women, preserving the freedom of speech and media, and most importantly, preventing the country from becoming a harbor for international terrorism—will not last long. Historically, politicians in Afghanistan have struggled to maintain a balance between institutional and informal governance; thus, if the U.S. does not support the Kabul administration, illicit power centers, warlords, and the Taliban will easily topple it.

In July 2017, the *New York Times* reported that President Trump asked Afghanistan

President Ashraf Ghani to back American companies in their interest in developing Afghanistan mineral reserves (Landler 2017). The extraction of Afghanistan's minerals—valued at over a trillion dollars—is a very daunting task, due to the country's lack of basic infrastructure such as electricity, roads, railroads, and security, but these natural resources should not be promised to any country for their military engagement.

Indeed, Afghanistan's natural resources remain inaccessible due to insecurity and the absence of infrastructure, such as roads, power, and railroads. None of the previous administrations requested access to the natural resources in exchange for maintaining the US military campaign in Afghanistan. This request in itself had a profoundly negative and delegitimizing impact on the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, and the Taliban repeated it in their propaganda to emphasize that the goal of the U.S. in Afghanistan is to loot the country's natural resources (Brown 2017: 12).

#### 2.4 Conclusion

The situation of the U.S. military's campaign in Afghanistan is that it cannot win the war, lose the war, send in more troops, nor withdraw its troops. The U.S. civilian agencies, such as the U.S. Embassy, USAID, and the Department of State, are overshadowed by the military. The military aspect of peacebuilding has been overemphasized and the development aspect of state-building has been ignored by all of the U.S. administrations under consideration.

Beyond doubt, all administrations took office with their own agendas and approaches. The early US counterterrorism strategy was simple in its objective, to kill or capture Taliban and Al Qaeda suspects, but once this strategy met the on-the-ground realities, the US had to change its strategy by committing to the state-building approach in Afghanistan. When the violence of the insurgency increased, the reluctant presidents opted to send more troops. When they were pressured, they abandoned their withdrawal strategies.

The U.S. military establishment's interest was to build the U.S. policy toward Afghanistan

around a counterinsurgency strategy. The military was given broad powers by Washington, the White House, and Congress to pursue this counterinsurgency strategy. Moreover, Congress provided an abundance of funding to the military, which enabled it to take the initiative in acting as U.S. ambassadors to rural districts by providing humanitarian aid, effectively replacing the U.S. and Afghan civilian agencies. The soldiers who had to fight local insurgents also became humanitarian workers. These interactions became more difficult when the civilian casualties increased as a result of U.S. military operations, eventually to the point that locals rejected any Western humanitarian assistance because they saw it as a means of U.S. influence in their local communities. As Afghans' anger toward the presence of U.S. troops has sharply increased, the Taliban insurgents have gained control of more areas. Many Afghans who have joined the Taliban are people who have lost family members or relatives to foreign and Afghan troop operations. According to a Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict (CIVIC) report, the areas that have suffered from the highest civilian casualties are the most susceptible to the increase of insurgency. The most important goal of a counterinsurgency strategy is to win the "hearts and minds" of locals, yet the results of the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan clearly indicate that the U.S. lost this battle because it focused too much on the enemy and not enough on the Afghans.

## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **PEACEBUILDING THROUGH DIALOGUE**

The U.S. and its allies have abandoned their hopes of a military victory over the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan by late 2017. The American public's opinion of the War in Afghanistan has stabilized in most polls. The findings of a 2018 poll by the Koch Institute suggested that 57% of Americans supported President Trump's authorization of the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Afghanistan, whereas 19% of Americans opposed it. The same poll also revealed that only 33% of Americans were in favor of negotiation with the Taliban to end the war, whereas 37% of Americans were opposed to talks between the U.S. and the Taliban. In October 2018, the findings of the Pew Research Center survey also demonstrated that Americans remained pessimistic about the U.S. approach in Afghanistan, with 49% of respondents stating that the U.S. had failed to accomplish its goals and 35% saying that the U.S. was successful in accomplishing its goals in Afghanistan.

After 18 years of war, the question of how to establish lasting peace in Afghanistan has proven to be troublesome for the U.S. and the Afghans. The process of peace talks between the U.S. and the Taliban, which started in early 2018, has lacked transparency and a clear strategy. However, we are starting to see the beginning of an end to a supposedly "endless war" for the U.S., which plans to withdraw most, if not all, of its troops by 2020. However, this might not end the conflict within Afghanistan, as a bad U.S. peace deal with the Taliban is more likely to create the conditions for future civil war than a sustainable peace among Afghans (Glaser and Mueller 2019).

This chapter contributes to scholarship that has demonstrated that each U.S. administration that has negotiated with the Taliban has done so with its own definition of peace and has sought to advance U.S. interests (e.g., the withdrawal of U.S. troops), over Afghans interests (e.g., a sustainable peace). This chapter also discusses the various initiatives that have been taken by

different U.S. administrations to engage with the Taliban. Although these different administrations appear to have taken different approaches in Afghanistan, none of these approaches have been well-coordinated between the U.S. military and civilian agencies. In section one, I briefly examine the negotiations of the Clinton and Bush administrations with the Taliban before 9/11, which were mainly focused on the U.S. government's demands that the Taliban cooperate with U.S. oil companies—specifically Unocal Corporation, an affiliated company of Chevron Corporation— so that they could access Central Asian gas reserves through Afghanistan and also, later, that Al Qaeda training camps be removed from Afghanistan. According to Ahmad Rashid, a Pakistani journalist, the U.S. and Pakistan agreed as early as 1994 to support the Taliban movement in the Afghanistan civil war (1996-2001) so that they could establish a regime in Afghanistan that would guarantee the security of the Unocal pipeline (2000: 176).

In section two, I explore the initiatives taken by the Obama administration directly or indirectly through the Afghan government. In March 2009, Obama opened a path to begin communication with the “moderate elements of the Taliban leadership” (Cooper 2009). The Obama initiative was not a coherent peace negotiation strategy; rather, it was a poorly coordinated counterinsurgency tool designed to break the Taliban leadership (Sheikh 2013: 10). In section three, I analyze the Trump administration's policy of holding reconciliatory talks with certain elements of the Taliban and the prospect of these talks. Trump's negotiation strategy has been focused on U.S. withdrawal rather than long-lasting peace. The Trump administration's attempts to negotiate peace between the U.S. and the Taliban does not consider the Afghan people, especially with regard to minoritarian issues. The Trump has rejected all of Obama's preconditional demands for negotiating with the Taliban, such as that the Taliban accept the Afghan constitution (Landay 2017). Section four concludes that U.S. has begun several initiatives to engage with the political faction of the Taliban, but such initiatives have not produced any tangible results. On one side of

the conflict, the Taliban military faction strongly resists any peace deals because its members consider themselves to be winning the war. On the other side, while peace talks are suspended, the Trump administration speaks about U.S. troops' withdrawal before the 2020 presidential election. It seems that the Trump administration considers unconditional peace talks with the Taliban to be a "potentially disastrous" but necessary endeavor to end the United States' longest war with minimal embarrassment (Lieven, 2019).

In the literature of the U.S. dialogue initiatives with the Taliban, several terms are used to describe different aspects of these initiatives, such as "reintegration," "negotiation," and "reconciliation." Mona Kanwal Sheikh argued that in the U.S. peacebuilding initiatives, "reintegration" refers to the Afghan government's peacebuilding programs, sponsored by the U.S. and UN, "to make the Taliban foot soldiers lay down arms by giving them financial incentives to do so." Sheikh defined "negotiation" as a peace process that requires a compromise from both the U.S. and the Taliban (2013: 7). However, Eric Schmitt (2018) explained that the real negotiation did not happen until July 2018, when the Trump administration began direct talks with the Taliban, conceding to the Taliban's demand not to include the Afghan government in the peace talks. Sheikh also framed the "reconciliation" process as, a process of restoring trust among the Afghan government and the Taliban. However, Schmitt (2018) indicated a problem with this concept, as the U.S. peacebuilding strategies do not include the other social and political actors in the dialogue discourse, such as representatives of Afghan civil society and the country's political parties. Therefore, as Sheikh claimed, this represents a scenario in which that the Afghan government and the Taliban are the sole legitimate stakeholders of the future of Afghanistan after the U.S. withdrawal (2013: 9).

### 3.1.1 Early Negotiation

The history of U.S. government negotiations with the Taliban begins with the Clinton and Bush administrations (Kellner 2003: 8). Under these two presidents, the U.S. negotiated with the Taliban leadership to make it safe for U.S. oil companies to build a trans-Central Asian gas pipeline from Turkmenistan in Central Asia to India through Afghanistan (Butts 2003). Both administrations pressured the Taliban to accept the UN's mediation attempts to end the Afghan Civil War (1996-2001) as early late 1996, when the Taliban captured Kabul, by bringing all parties involved to the negotiating table. However, the U.S. ceased its negotiation attempts after the *U.S.S Cole* bombing in Aden, Yemen, in October 2000, which is believed to have been coordinated by Al Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan (Sheikh 2013: 13).

In the late 1990s, negotiations with the Taliban were mainly conducted by U.S. oil companies (Brisard and Dasquie 2002). Even after the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, the Clinton administration kept its contacts with the Taliban leadership. According to the declassified documents released in September 2004, Mullah Omar, the Taliban's leader, called Washington to deny any evidence that Osama bin Laden had coordinated the attacks from Afghanistan two days after the Clinton administration had launched cruise missiles to destroy bin Laden's training camps in Afghanistan (National Security Archive 2004: No. 134).

In early 2001, the Bush administration increased its communication with the Taliban. In March 2001, a Taliban delegation headed by Sayed Rahmatullah Hashimi, a close aide to Mullah Omar, was invited to Washington. The U.S.'s main agenda was to pressure Taliban to expel bin Laden from Afghanistan and also to facilitate U.S. companies' security to access the gas reserves in Central Asia through Afghanistan (Madsen 2002). However, Al Qaeda was a key ally of the Taliban and was helping it in the Afghan Civil War by providing it with weapons and military advisors. The Taliban militias lacked discipline and weapons; therefore, the Taliban leadership

needed Al Qaeda to train and command these militias on the battlefield. The Taliban also benefited from bin Laden's popularity among Islamic Salafist movements in Pakistan, which were supplying the Taliban with foot soldiers. The Taliban leaders were concerned that if they evicted Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden from their territories, Al Qaeda would join the Afghanistan Northern Alliance, the other opposing party in the Afghan Civil War, and the Taliban would lose its advantage. In July 2001, the U.S. began a round of talks with the Taliban representative in Berlin, Germany. When the talks broke down over the future of bin Laden, the U.S. representatives threatened the Taliban by stating that it could choose "a carpet of gold or a carpet of bombs" (Brisard and Dasquie 2002).

The last official meeting between the Bush administration and the Taliban was recorded five weeks before the 9/11 attacks, in August 2001. The meeting was between Christina Rocca, US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, and Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban's ambassador to Pakistan, who was later imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay until 2005 (Sheikh 2013: 13).

Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush announced the U.S.'s policy of not negotiating with terrorists, effectively ending all formal communication with the Taliban leadership. However, the U.S. State Department had not designated the Taliban as a terrorist organization, mainly—as James Dobbins, a former U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan, explained—because it would make future talks difficult and would not serve U.S. interests (Farivar 2017). The administration only pressured the UN Security Council to add the Taliban's top leadership to the United Nations Security Council Sanctions Lists. This policy of stopping formal negotiations with the Taliban remained until March 2009, when President Obama, in an interview with *The New York Times*, proposed that the U.S. communicate with moderate elements of the Taliban leadership in Afghanistan (Cooper 2009). The U.S. government funded a reintegration

program for Taliban soldiers and moderate leaders in the Afghan government as early as 2005, releasing moderate Taliban leaders such as Mullah Wakil Ahmed Mutawakkil, the Taliban's last foreign minister, in 2005 (Meo 2009).

### 3.1.2 The Afghan Government Reintegration Program

When discussing the peace process in Afghanistan between 2005 and 2010, it is important to understand it as a reintegration process. In this context, in 2005, the U.S. and its allies developed a reintegration program that aimed to lure the Taliban's foot soldiers to voluntarily lay down their arms and stop their insurgency. The program was called Tahkim-e-Solh, or the Commission for Strengthening Peace and Stability (PTS), and was headed by an Afghan government appointee. However, the insurgents perceived the reintegration "as a form of surrender" to a weak Afghan government (Frentzen 2010).

As the first bona fide reintegration program in Afghanistan since the U.S. intervention in 2001, in general terms, the process was supposed to entice low- to mid-level insurgents to stop fighting and accept the Afghan constitution in return for small financial incentives (Sheikh 2013). The Karzai government was credited with initiating the Tahkim-e-Solh program. In addition to encouraging active insurgents to stop fighting Afghan government forces and U.S. troops by sparing them from legal prosecution (Higashi 2017), the program provided financial incentives to the elders of villages to dissuade the youth from joining the insurgency. However, the program did not guarantee the participants any immunity from U.S. military attacks and provided little financial support to unemployed de-radicalized insurgents (Frentzen 2010). The Tahkim-e-Solh program, or PTS, failed because it was a corrupt process, if not an outright scam, that benefited certain individuals related to the Afghan government.

The program's head, Sebghatullah Mujaddedi, a former president in the Mujahidin government and a Northern Alliance leader, was an ally of President Hamid Karzai, who benefited

the most, politically and financially. The Tahkim-e-Solh program was widely corrupt and several cases of monetary theft emerged from its offices. The program officials claimed that it had reintegrated approximately 5,000 Taliban fighters; however, American and British officials in Kabul, two of the main donors to PTS, rejected this claim and stated that fewer than 10% of the reintegrated men were fighters, the rest of them being “shepherds” who were used to exploit the program (Meo 2008).

In 2008, after several internal communications from British and American officials were released that showed that the program’s money was being given to the wrong people (Meo 2008), the U.S. and U.K. stopped funding the Tahkim-e-Solh program. A UN report stated that approximately half of the program’s participants were not real fighters. The Afghan government, under pressure from its Western allies, renamed the program the High Peace Council (HPC) in 2010. President Karzai appointed Burhanuddin Rabbani, another former president from the Mujahidin government and key Northern Alliance leader, as the head of the commission. The HPC was the official Afghan government agency in “reintegration” programs that was engaged in large-scale corruption, until early 2018, after several key figures of the HPC joined President Ghani’s rival, Chief Executive Abdullah, and President Ghani ordered the “dissolution of the HPC Secretariat,” effectively dissolving the program and transferring the reintegration and peace negotiation authority to Hamdullah Mohib, his close ally and Afghanistan National Security Advisor.

### 3.2.1 Obama’s Peacemaking With the “Moderate Taliban”

In March 2009, several months into Barack Obama’s presidency, his administration showed a willingness to begin formal negotiations with “moderate elements of the Taliban leadership” for the first time since 9/11 (Cooper and Stolberg 2009). Under Obama’s leadership, the main concern for the U.S. was to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan with a relatively successful narrative. In

order to accomplish this, Obama's administration deployed tens of thousands of reinforcements to Afghanistan while also beginning to soften its tone by dividing the Taliban leadership into radicals ("hawks") and moderates ("doves") (Bew et al. 2013: 27).

During the Obama administration's review of U.S. policies in Afghanistan, two different groups in the U.S. government advocated two different agendas. The first, which included U.S. special envoy to Afghanistan Richard Holbrooke and Ambassador General Karl Eikenberry, favored direct negotiations with the Taliban. The second group, which was more in favor of defeating—or at least weakening—the Taliban on the battlefield, was most prominently led by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mullen, and other senior military leaders, such as General Petraeus and General McChrystal (Chandrasekaran 2012: 223).

The first group claimed that, after years of U.S. support, the Afghan government was as corrupt and incompetent as ever; therefore, there was a need for a political settlement with the Taliban to end the war and leave Afghanistan (Chandrasekaran 2012: 126). The second group believed that there was a chance to defeat or reduce the power of the Taliban insurgency by deploying more troops and reinforcements to Afghanistan. The CIA and military leaders claimed that there was no sign that the Taliban had renounced Al Qaeda, and they were alarmed by President Obama's remarks about favoring talks with "moderate Taliban leaders" (Bew et al., 2013: 28).

Understanding the concerns of both groups, President Obama chose a combination of dialogue and coercion to promote his peacebuilding strategy. In 2009, when Obama took office, he was concerned that the Taliban were in a strong position on the ground; therefore, there was a need to drive the Taliban out of their strongholds, such as Kandahar and Helmand in the south, and Nangahar in the East. This would create a sense among the Taliban leadership that they could not

win the war, so they would join the negotiating table with limited bargaining power. Obama ordered the deployment of tens of thousands of fresh reinforcements to coerce the Taliban leadership to surrender or bring them into negotiations with limited bargaining power (Chandrasekaran 2012: 127). Meanwhile, Obama authorized Holbrooke to pressure the Afghan government to fight corruption and show more transparency in the U.S.-funded reintegration program.

### 3.2.2 U.S. Allies' Pressure to Find a Political Solution

The American officials who advocated for a political solution to end the war found sympathy among U.S., NATO, and non-NATO allies. In particular, the U.K. was becoming increasingly frustrated with U.S. military strategy. The 2001 intervention was the U.K.'s fourth venture in Afghanistan after having fought three wars between 1839 and 1919. The British advocated direct negotiations with the Taliban as early as the summer of 2007 (Harding 2007). The British believed that they had deeper knowledge than the Americans about the politics in the region and that the U.S. did not value the U.K.'s centuries of "conflict resolution expertise" (Rayment 2011). However, all Afghan parties, including the government, the Taliban, and the public, were suspicious of the British motives, due to the U.K.'s long history of war with Afghanistan. The public, and especially minority groups, saw the British peace advocacy with the deepest suspicion because of the U.K.'s history of supporting Pashtun nationalism and authoritarian regimes in Afghanistan, including the support of Amir Abd al-Rahmān Khān, the founder of modern Afghanistan, who suppressed not only minorities but also rival Pashtun clans.

In 2009, in a speech during a NATO summit, British Foreign Minister David Miliband urged the U.S. and Afghan governments to develop a "political strategy" to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table for an "inclusive political settlement in Afghanistan" (Burns 2009). In his speech, Miliband called moderate members of the Taliban "accidental guerillas." He claimed that these

“accidental guerillas” had joined the Taliban out of their sense of Pashtun nationalism. The Taliban government before 9/11 was overwhelmingly composed of Pashtuns, while the Afghan government after 9/11 was created to include all ethnicities in Afghanistan. Miliband believed that the Taliban was ready to renounce any association with global radicals if assured that foreign troops would leave Afghanistan. Although the British did not publicly support Pashtuns over other ethnicities, there has always been distrust of the U.K. among Afghan minorities.

Behind the scenes, Saudi Arabia also tried to mediate between the US and Taliban leadership. In July 2009, King Abdullah offered to facilitate talks between the Obama administration and certain factions of the Taliban leadership that communicated with the Saudi government (Bew et al. 2013: 29). The Obama administration ignored this offer, hoping that its new counterinsurgency strategy would give the U.S. more bargaining power in the future.

The Obama administration and many of its Western allies believed that increasing military pressure would force the moderate Taliban leadership to accept the U.S. preconditional demands for negotiations (Semple 2009). This belief resulted from the divergence between Mullah Baradar, a Taliban operational commander and allegedly a moderate leader, and Siraj Haqqani, known to have been responsible for most deadly attacks on Afghans and Americans troops (Khan 2009).

### 3.2.3 The Peace Process: Pragmatism in Play

In early 2010, the Obama administration resumed its funding of the program for reintegrating Taliban foot soldiers into society through the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program (APRP) (SIGAR 2019: 39). In total, the U.S. spent \$55 million on APRP financial support. At the same time, the U.S. Department of Defense established its own reintegration program, the Afghanistan Reintegration Program (ARP), to enable the local Afghan military to support APRP in rural areas. Congress appropriated \$50 million for ARP (SIGAR 2010: 71).

The APRP and ARP strategies were to provide financial incentives for low-ranking Taliban

fighters to lay down their arms (Fair 2010). The programs focused only on reintegration and lacked any reconciliatory aspects, such as declaring amnesty for all insurgents from prosecution by the Afghan government and its foreign allies (Sajjad 2010). In other words, the program employed counterinsurgency tactics to lure Taliban fighters into surrendering their arms. The DoD and ISAF implemented these programs to weaken the insurgency.

The APRP and ARP's association with international military forces was the main reason for its failure (Sajjad 2010: viii). The financial incentives were perceived by the fighters as a bribe to accept the occupation. The programs attracted more scammers than real fighters. According to the APRP 2016 report, the program had reintegrated 11,000 insurgents into normal civilian life, but the same report stated that the insurgents had surrendered only approximately 9,000 weapons, and the reintegrated fighters were mostly from northern and western provinces, whereas the Taliban's strongholds were in the southern and eastern provinces (APRP 2016: 4). A report from the UN in 2013 claimed that 80% of the program's participants were not actual fighters (UN Report 2013: 14).

In addition to the U.S.-sponsored reintegration programs, the military surge was also relatively unsuccessful in Afghanistan. The failure of the U.S. military to reduce the level of insurgency encouraged the Obama administration to adjust its approach by initiating secret talks with the Taliban leadership. Between late 2010 and mid-2011, the Obama administration changed its stance on the "preconditions" for the peace talks by stating that the "preconditions" could be "the outcomes of the peace talks" (Bew et al. 2013: 31). On February 18, 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton emphasized that the administration was willing to "reconcile with an adversary," and that the U.S. red lines could be "the necessary outcomes of any negotiation." This important adjustment helped to start a "political surge," a process of offering the insurgency's leaders government jobs in return for laying down their arms, seemingly under Afghan government

leadership. However, in reality, the U.S. was involved directly in the talks (Nordland 2011).

In November 2010, the U.S. talks with the Taliban started in a secret meeting in Munich, Germany, with Tayyab Agha, a close aide to Mullah Omar. The meeting was facilitated by the German and Qatari governments. The talks continued until 2011 in Qatar and Germany, working on establishing a political office for the Taliban in Doha. On August 30, 2011, Mullah Omar showed his willingness to start talks with the U.S. in his yearly message for the end of Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr.

As a sign of progress in the talks, in January 2012, the U.S. agreed to allow the Taliban to open its unofficial political office in Doha. In the early stages, the talks were only about prisoner exchange (Sheikh 2013: 14). The U.S. wanted the Taliban to release Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, whom the Taliban had held captive since June 2009. The Taliban wanted to exchange Sergeant Bergdahl for five of its leaders who were detained in Guantanamo Bay. In March 2012, the talks collapsed because the Obama administration declined to release the Taliban commanders (Borger 2012). The 2012 U.S. election campaign was the main reason why the Obama administration did not agree to the prisoner exchange. After his victory in the 2012 election, Obama agreed to a prisoner exchange, and Sergeant Bergdahl was released in 2014 in exchange for five high-ranking Taliban leaders detained in Guantanamo Bay (Sheikh 2013: 14). The prisoner exchange was a victory for the Obama administration, firstly because Sergeant Bergdahl was the last American soldier to be held in Taliban captivity, and secondly because the five high-ranking Taliban were sent to Doha, Qatar, and eventually became the key figures in the Taliban negotiating team in the peace talks with the U.S.

Although a willingness to talk to the Taliban arose in the Obama administration, this did not in itself create the conditions for reconciliation among Afghans. The core reality of the war in Afghanistan remained unchanged: the Taliban refused to negotiate with the Afghan government,

believing that they would regain their advantage once the foreign troops left Afghanistan. Despite the Afghan government controlling more territory than the Taliban (approximately 56% of the country compared to the Taliban's 14%), as a national unity government divided between President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah, it is weak, indecisive, corrupt, and seems unlikely to survive once the U.S. troops leave Afghanistan.

Moreover, the Taliban did not demonstrate any moderation or softening of their aims and tactics throughout the negotiations with the US (Bew et al. 2013: 45). In September 2010, a Taliban peace envoy detonated a bomb hidden in his turban, killing Burhanuddin Rabbani, head of the HPC, prompting the Afghan government to suspend the peace process (Boone 2011).

The Obama administration used a combination of military operations and sporadic negotiations to force the Taliban leadership to agree to reconcile with the Afghan government. While it is possible that there is a pragmatic faction in the Taliban leadership that favors negotiation and reconciliation, a powerful faction of Taliban hardliners, including Siraj Haqqani and Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, who became the Taliban leader after the death of Mullah Omar in 2015, opposed any negotiation and reconciliation (Barrett 2012). These Taliban hardliners do not want a power-sharing government; they want to reestablish the Taliban Islamic Emirate that existed before the U.S. 2001 intervention.

### 3.2.4 The Afghan Government's Reaction to the U.S.-Taliban Talks

During the Obama presidency, the U.S. pressured President Karzai to fight the rampant corruption within his government. In public, the U.S. claimed that the Afghan government should lead the peace process, but in reality, the U.S. secretly met with the Taliban's envoys in Germany and Qatar.

In December 2011, several news agencies, including Reuters, broke the news of "10 months of secret meetings" between the Taliban and U.S. representatives and a possible breakthrough that

would lead the peace talks to end the War in Afghanistan. When these secret meetings became public, Karzai openly criticized them (Sheikh 2013: 17). On December 14, 2011, the Afghan government recalled its ambassador to Qatar as a sign of protest over the creation of a Taliban political office in Doha. In June 2013, Karzai's government announced that it would not participate in any peace negotiations with the Taliban if the host country did not stop the Taliban from using their flag and signs in the meetings, as these would legitimize the Taliban (Riedel 2013). In late 2013, Karzai's government suspended talks with the U.S. over a long-term strategic agreement because Karzai believed that Washington had not been honest with his government about the U.S.-Taliban talks (Roberts 2013).

However, it was clear that Karzai's main concern was that the U.S. was going to undercut him and make a deal with the Taliban without involving his government. Several aides to President Karzai expressed their concern that the U.S. was not sharing information regarding the talks with the Afghan government and that it was not pushing the Taliban to agree to talks with the Afghan government (Bew et al. 2013: 35). It seems that Karzai's intention was to control any peace initiatives to ensure that his share of power was protected in any potential peace agreement.

In 2009, Obama took an unprecedented step to initiate talks between the U.S. and the Taliban. Both sides compromised to begin the talks. The talks did not result in a peace agreement by the end of Obama's presidency, but regardless of the outcome, it was the beginning of the U.S. negotiating with the Taliban.

### 3.3.1 Trump's Peace Policy

In August 2017, President Trump announced his Afghanistan policy through his new South Asia strategy. The policy included deploying 3,500 new U.S. troops to Afghanistan, bringing the total number of U.S. troops to 16,000, assisted by 2,000 NATO troops. Many Afghans, especially Afghan elites and minority groups, interpreted this move as a new commitment to their country,

and many others, particularly those who lived in territories under Taliban control, predicted more war and destruction (Constable 2017). However, in July 2018, the military stalemate and ground realities convinced President Trump that the U.S. needed to start unconditional direct talks with the Taliban in order to leave Afghanistan with a victorious narrative. However, to do so, the U.S. had to accept the Taliban's demand not to include the Afghan government in the talks. This was a significant reversal of U.S.-Afghan policy, as the previous administration had claimed to support an "Afghan-led, Afghan-owned" approach to peace negotiation (Mashal and Schmitt 2018).

After nine rounds of talks, the U.S.-Taliban negotiations seemed to produce results when U.S. Special Envoy Khalilzad confirmed that the U.S. and Taliban had reached an agreement on September 2, 2019, in which the U.S. would withdraw approximately 5,000 of its 14,000 troops within 135 days, and the Taliban would reduce its violence. The agreement also stated that the U.S. and its allies would withdraw all of their troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2020 (De young et al. 2019). With multiple reports detailing the agreement, it seemed a great victory for the Taliban, because they did not make any specific concessions in return, did not agree to a ceasefire, did not agree to negotiate with the Afghan government, and did not clearly denounce international terrorism (Crocker 2019). Meanwhile, the majority of the members of Congress rejected the agreement (Graham and Keane 2019). On September 7, 2019, under mounting pressure from his allies, President Trump suspended the peace negotiations with the Taliban indefinitely (Trump 2019).

Although many reports state that the U.S. and Taliban are working to restart the talks, the prospect of U.S.-Taliban peace negotiations and their ability to produce a peace deal is unclear. The refusal of the Taliban to reduce its violence and President Trump's insistence on withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2020, with or without a peace agreement, have caused numerous political commentators to predict a "total civil war" in Afghanistan (Sediqi and Chiacu

2019).

### 3.3.2 Trump's Afghan Policy Debacle

For a decade, the U.S. policy in Afghanistan was to force the Taliban to negotiate with the Afghan government. By not including the Afghan government in the talks, President Trump scrapped all of his predecessors' efforts to build a reliable partner in Afghanistan. Over the last 18 years, these efforts have cost U.S. taxpayers more than \$133 billion (CRS Report 2019: 1).

Over nine months of negotiations with the Taliban, the US did not achieve any tangible results other than to lose the trust of the Afghan government and public. Although the U.S. continues to fund the Afghan government, it has cut or reduced its developmental aid; notably, over \$100 million of funding that was supposed to be spent on generating electricity for Kabul was canceled. Under the proposed agreement, the future of the Afghan government was tied to future negotiations among Afghans, but in reality, there were reports that the U.S. had proposed a transitional government comprised of the Taliban and other political figures, which could have changed the name of the country back to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Schake 2019). From this standpoint, it seems that the U.S. was negotiating for the total surrender of the Afghan government to the Taliban; this prompted President Ghani to react angrily, rejecting any settlement that "limits Afghans' rights" (CRS Report 2019: 2).

It was astonishing to many U.S. policymakers and Afghan partners to see that the Trump administration had agreed to such terms. Nevertheless, the Trump administration has stated that the U.S. policy in Afghanistan is to prevent international terrorists from using Afghanistan as a safe haven while also preventing any attacks on the U.S. by the terrorists, rather than state-building (CRS Report 2019: 12). During the Trump presidency, the main achievement of the U.S. has been to initiate direct peace talks with the Taliban, yet the Taliban is currently stronger than ever. In late 2019, the U.S. and the Taliban attempted to restart their talks through a prisoner exchange of two

American university professors for three Taliban commanders. However, it remains unclear whether the U.S.-Taliban future agreement will stop the violent conflict in Afghanistan.

### 3.4 Conclusion

Since the late 1990s, several U.S. administrations have engaged in talks with the Taliban. Before 9/11, the main demands that the U.S. made of the Taliban were that it provide security for American oil companies to access the South Asian oil and gas reserves and that it expel Al Qaeda from Afghanistan, while the Taliban demanded to be recognized as the sole legitimate Afghan government.

After 9/11, the Bush administration followed a “capture or kill” strategy, while at the same time maintaining a connection with moderate elements of the Taliban leadership, who later became the Taliban negotiators with the U.S., especially during the Trump presidency. This was a clearly counterintuitive strategy.

The Obama administration followed its own peace negotiation strategy, which later created the foundation for the U.S.-Taliban talks in Doha, Qatar. The Obama peace strategy was to use a military surge to force the moderate elements of the Taliban to the negotiating table. The problem with this strategy was that the Obama administration overemphasized the use of military force, which caused high numbers of civilian casualties.

The Trump administration has emphasized one specific goal, which is to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan, with or without a peace agreement. The flaw in this strategy is that the Taliban has made very modest concessions in the talks because its leaders understand that the Americans are leaving, so they see themselves as the inevitable and imminent victors. The losing party in this strategy is the Afghan government, which feels abandoned by its American partner.

In light of the U.S.-Taliban negotiations, there is very little guarantee that the insurgency in Afghanistan will end. On the contrary, the violence might drastically increase because the Taliban

leadership has broken into several competing factions. Some of the Taliban's influential leaders who oppose peace talks, such as Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir, who was the Taliban military chief and a former Guantanamo Bay detainee, have joined the Afghanistan branch of the Islamic State.

However, overall, the Taliban negotiation agenda seems clear: the Taliban leadership have separated their negotiations into two different tracks. The first is with the U.S. over the withdrawal and, if that is agreed, the second is with Afghan political groups other than the Afghan government over the future of governance in Afghanistan.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

Throughout this research paper, I have presented a historical narrative of U.S. peacebuilding strategies in Afghanistan in order to discuss and analyze their effectiveness. The military strategy of the U.S. has not been successful in decreasing the level of insurgency in Afghanistan. The U.S. strategy of dialogue has also proven to be ineffective in peacebuilding. However, there is strong support among international players, such as the U.S., the UN, and Afghanistan's neighboring countries, as well as throughout Afghan society, for a negotiated peace to end the conflict. In this chapter, I discuss Afghans' sentiments toward the U.S. peacebuilding strategies. Afghanistan is a multiethnic and tribal society. The population of the country is divided into 14 ethnolinguistic groups. With regard to peace, representatives of each ethnicity claim to want peace, but their visions of peace conflict with one another. The Pashtun population (which is mostly concentrated in the east and south of Afghanistan but is also dispersed in parts of the north and west) is strongly against a military approach and advocates for peace negotiations with the Taliban. This sentiment toward peace is also shared by other ethnic groups, such as the Hazaras (prevalent in the center of Afghanistan, in Bamiyan, Daikundi, and Ghazni, and also scattered in large cities such as Kabul, the capital, Herat, the biggest city in west of the country, and Mazar Sharif, in the north), the Tajiks (based mostly in west and north of Afghanistan), and the Uzbeks (prominent in the north and northwest), but these groups also want the U.S. and Afghan governments to pressure the Taliban militarily until they accept the Afghan constitution, which grants equal rights to all ethnicities.

The Afghan constitution recognizes 14 ethnolinguistic groups in the country, of which Pashtuns comprise approximately 42%, Tajiks 27%, Hazaras and Uzbeks 9% each, Aimaq 4%, Turkmen 3%, Baluch 2%, and the other 10 ethnic groups combine to form 4% of the country's population. Historically, Pashtuns—mostly followers of Hanafi Sunni Islam and speakers of

Pashtu—have been the ruling ethnic group in the country for over 250 years, except for a brief period in the Mujahedeen’s short-lived government for which Burhanuddin Rabbani, a Tajik from the northeast of the country, was selected as president. The Tajiks—mostly Hanafi Sunni and Farsi-Dari speakers—have traditionally been part of the ruling class but as low- to mid-level ranking administrators. The Uzbeks—mostly Hanafi Sunni speakers of Uzbek, have traditionally been mainly involved in the military as low ranking officers. The Hazaras—mostly Shia Muslims with close cultural ties with Iran and speakers of Farsi-Dari—were denounced by the Taliban as infidels because they practiced Shi’ism. Therefore, members of the ethnic group were not permitted to hold government positions in the Taliban regime. Many political commentators believe that the Hazaras benefited from the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan because the political and socio-economic spheres were opened to minorities, removing institutionalized oppression. Many Hazaras have since entered colleges, served in the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, and worked in government offices.

Since the establishment of the Taliban movement in the late 1990s, the Taliban has been predominantly composed of Pashtuns. Many Pashtuns—especially those from the east and south—perceive the Taliban as their true representatives, because the Taliban leaders are mainly from the Pashtun-dominated areas that are populated by the influential Sadozai and Barakzai clans within the broader Pashtun ethnicity. In relation to peace negotiations, these Pashtuns want a peace deal that brings their true representatives to power. They mostly consider the Pashtun technocrats in Kabul, such as Karzai and Ghani, to be U.S. puppets. There might be many reasons for this rhetoric. One might relate to the rivalry between Pashtun clans, especially those in the south and east who were in power during the Taliban tenure and those in the north and center of the country who joined the U.S.-created Afghan government in 2001. For example, President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani—known as Mohammad Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai before his presidency—belongs to

the Ahmadzai clan, which is not as large and influential as the Sadozai and Barakzai clans. Another reason might be that these Pashtun technocrats have not been able to stop the U.S. bombardments, which have mostly targeted the Pashtun-settled areas over the last 18 years. However, the representatives of other ethnic groups—the Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks—want a power-sharing peace deal that includes the Taliban in the current government, but they don't want the Taliban to have absolute power after the peace deal. Since the Taliban fought against these ethnic groups and committed serious war crimes against them, such as the massacre of Hazaras in Mazar Sharif in 1998, the massacre in Yakaolang in January 2001 (Human Right Watch Report 2001), and the forceful expulsion of Tajiks from the Parwan plains in north Afghanistan (Vranesic 2003), they believe that the Taliban will violate their rights and commit atrocities against them.

The Afghan government, under Karzai and Ghani's leadership, has also been motivated to negotiate with the Taliban as long as those negotiations do not compromise its share of power. The Afghan government fears the waning support from its Western allies and is cautious of being "sold out" by the Americans because of the U.S.-Taliban peace talks in Doha; therefore, the Afghan government, under both Karzai and Ghani, has reached out to neighboring countries who do not have good relations with the U.S., such as Iran, China, and Russia, for their support in disrupting the U.S.-Taliban peace talks.

There has been little evidence of true interest in reconciliation between the various parts of Afghan society. The Taliban is unwilling to announce even a temporary ceasefire, to soften its strict interpretation of Sharia law, or to accept the part of the Afghan constitution that guarantees equal rights for all Afghans. There is no evidence to show that the Afghan government and other involved parties, including other ethnic groups, desire any actual reconciliation in their demands that will help to initiate peace talks between Afghans, such as by accepting the Taliban demand to rewrite the constitution, which might result in changes that limit some rights for women and

minorities. They also refuse to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate Afghan government before the 2001 U.S. intervention, because the UN and most other countries did not recognize the Taliban government.

#### 4.1 Interviews and Findings

This research provided an overview of the different peace initiatives. The following parts of this chapter are based on interviews with seven experts on Afghanistan. The interviews were conducted in November 2019 through Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp Messenger to assess the U.S. peacebuilding in Afghanistan and the challenges to initiating meaningful peace talks between Afghans. The interviews were also designed to present Afghans' perspectives on the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan since 2001.

By analyzing the interviewees' statements, it seems that Afghan public opinion is strongly in favor of peace negotiations with the Taliban, but the vision of peace is divided along ethnic lines. The Pashtun interviewees do not perceive themselves as being represented in the current Afghan government, while in contrast, the other interviewees from different ethnicities consider the current government to be the most inclusive regime in Afghanistan's history. The interviewees were asked about the reason behind U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and their answers were also divided along ethnic lines. Hazaras and Tajiks appear to see the U.S. intervention as a move to punish a rogue regime that was sponsoring terrorism but had an unintentional humanitarian effect on the Afghan minorities, as the Taliban was suppressing their rights. In contrast, the Pashtuns see the intervention as a war against an independent Pashtun government, the Taliban, that was winning the civil war and was refusing to relent to the U.S. pressure to evict Islamist fundamentalist groups, such as Al Qaeda, from Afghanistan.

The interviewees were also asked about their assessment of the U.S. peacebuilding strategies in Afghanistan. The answers regarding the effectiveness of these strategies were

unanimously negative. The interviewees all claimed that these strategies had failed but their opinions about the reasons for this failure differed. The interviewees' main arguments about the failure of U.S. peacebuilding strategies can be summarized into three key points: the rampant corruption in the Afghan government and the lack of U.S. attention to fighting it, the partnership of the U.S. with the warlords, and the U.S. approach of excluding third-party negotiators, such as the UN, from peace negotiations.

Moreover, the interviewees were asked about the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the prospects of the War in Afghanistan. The interviewees shared the common view that if the U.S. troops leave Afghanistan without arranging a peace deal among Afghans, the chance of a civil war will be very high. However, the interviewees' answers regarding the form that peace would take for different ethnic groups were conflicting. The Pashtun nationalist and Islamist groups are eager for the U.S. to leave as early as possible because they believe themselves to have bargaining power over the minorities and Afghan liberals. Women's rights and minorities' activists perceive the peace talks to be a challenging and obscure process that might result in the loss of their rights.

In brief, it seems that all Afghans want peace, but their visions of this peace contradict one another. Some Afghans fight for equal rights, while some fight for dominance. The peace in Afghanistan might currently be as close as ever or as far away as ever.

#### 4.2 The U.S. Presence in Afghanistan

Over the past 40 years, many countries, such as the Soviet Union (later Russia), the U.S., Pakistan, Iran, India, and Saudi Arabia, have supported insurgencies designed to overthrow the Afghan government in Kabul. Sayed Nadim, an Afghan diplomat, believes that in 2001, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan with the support of the Afghan Northern Alliance to remove the Taliban and its allies—Al Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the Pakistani Taliban movement (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan)—and to wage a “performative war.” He explains that 9/11 was a blow

to U.S. hegemonic authority. Therefore, the Bush administration needed a quick reaction to one of the most destructive attacks on American soil. He uses the performative war thesis and its concepts of status and hierarchy to explain the wars of the U.S. in Afghanistan and Iraq. This thesis argues that before 9/11, the U.S. enjoyed global prestige and status in line with the U.S. military's capabilities and social-economic rank; the U.S. was universally acknowledged as a hegemonic power. However, the attacks of 9/11 shattered that perception of deterrence and hegemony that the U.S. had established against challenges to its rule (Butt 2017: 3). Consequently, the U.S. needed to demonstrate its strength and hegemonic power to the world. Only starting a war could show that the U.S. military was capable of preserving the dominant status of the U.S. in the world. Nadim also claims that U.S. military leaders believed that they needed a quick victory over the Taliban and its allied international terrorist groups to lead the other "rogue states," such as Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Libya, to fear U.S. military power and force them to submit to the global order under the authority of the U.S.

Jawid Hamidi, an English professor at Baghlan University, believes that the U.S. invaded Afghanistan for political and intelligence-gathering reasons. He claims that the events of 9/11 and the Taliban's misogynist image created the conditions for the U.S. to convince the global audience that the war was a humanitarian act, but that in reality, the U.S. planned to set up several military and intelligence bases in Afghanistan for the purposes of surveilling its rivals (China and Russia), its enemies (Iran's Islamic Revolutionary regime), and Salafi Jihadism in Pakistan (commonly known as Jihadism or the Salafi movement). Salafi Jihadism was established by international Islamist fighters who had fought in the Soviet-Afghan war. It is a Sunni, transnational, religious-political ideology that has an absolute commitment to "physical jihad," rejecting democracy, liberalism, and Shi'ism. Hamidi insists that the presence of Salafi Jihadism in Pakistan and its strong connection to the Pakistani military is one of the main reasons for the U.S. presence in

Afghanistan over the last 18 years. He also indicates some reports that Iranian military dissidents were trained in U.S. bases in Afghanistan to carry out attacks on Iran.

Mohamad Mustafa Naizai, who worked as a U.S. military cultural advisor, translating and acting as a cultural broker between the U.S. military and local Afghans in the War in Afghanistan, believes that the U.S. removed the Taliban government because the Taliban did not relent to the U.S. government's pressure to allow American companies to build a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to India. He questions the view that the Taliban was a brutal regime that violated the rights of ethnic minorities. He claims that the Taliban are the true patriots who stand up against the "exploitation of natural resources" by Afghan warlords and the U.S. He indicates reports that Afghanistan has one of the largest mineral natural reserves in the world and claims that the U.S. and its Western allies want a "puppet government" in Afghanistan so that they can "steal Afghanistan's wealth." However, over the last 18 years, there has not been any attempt by the U.S. government or U.S.-owned companies to develop Afghanistan's mineral natural reserves, even though the Afghan government has offered incentives to American and Western companies, including promising to waive taxes for several years for any business that they start in Afghanistan.

#### 4.3 U.S. Peacebuilding in Afghanistan

The U.S. peacebuilding strategies in Afghanistan, whether through military means or dialogue, have been inconclusive. The U.S. military strategy has proven unsuccessful in removing the insurgency from Afghanistan. Given this situation in which a military strategy was not a solution, the U.S. has been attempting to negotiate a peace agreement with the Taliban since late 2017. Ahmad Haqqarast, a public relations officer for the Afghanistan High Peace Council's regional office in Faryab province believes that the American counterinsurgency strategy has involved many misconceptions. He argues that the Americans thought that if they removed the

brutal regime of the Taliban, the Afghans would see the Americans as their saviors. This was somewhat true for the first four years of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan (2002–2005). In general, Afghans were hopeful that U.S. presence in Afghanistan would help to bring peace and stability to the country. However, the Afghans soon came to understand that the U.S. had simply replaced the Taliban with warlords, who have violated their rights ever since. Haqqparast claims that the U.S. chose the wrong local partner in the fight against terrorism; many Taliban recruits are local people—mainly farmers—who are oppressed by the local warlords. The warlords have demanded that the locals pay for their security services so that they can protect them from the Taliban; if the locals cannot compensate the warlords with money, the warlords confiscate anything that is valuable, including land, effectively taking away the most valuable part of a farmer’s life.

Haqqparast supports the view that peace negotiations are desirable for all parties—including the U.S., the Taliban, and the Afghan government—except the warlords, who are benefiting from the ongoing war, even if such negotiations do not produce a stable peace. He strongly believes that if the peace talks fail, the risks associated with this are greater for the Taliban than for the U.S. or the Afghan government because of the Taliban’s claim that this war is a holy war—jihad—against the U.S. and Afghan government, and the Afghan government, and that it is fighting to establish a government under Sharia law. If the Taliban accepts a power-sharing arrangement brokered by the U.S., it will undercut its own propaganda and lose its legitimacy among its followers.

Dawod Hosaini, a civil society activist based in Daikundi province, suggests that civilian casualties have been the main reason for the dramatic increase in the level of insurgency in Afghanistan. He adds that the U.S. and Afghan forces conduct nightly operations to capture Taliban leaders, but most of the time, these troops use excessive force against civilians; on multiple occasions, they have killed innocent people. He also posits the view that the peace talks would have been more successful if a third party, like the UN, had facilitated a peace deal between the

Taliban and the U.S. and Afghan governments. He argues that all parties involved are actively fighting each other on the ground; if a third party that was trusted by all could arbitrate when the need to take a reconciliatory move arose, it would be easier for the Taliban, the U.S. government, or the Afghan government to do so.

Mohammad Saber Mamozai, who worked as a U.S. cultural advisor, translating and acting as a cultural broker with the locals in U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, thinks that the increasing Pashtun insurgency is largely about the political exclusion of the true Pashtun representatives from the Kabul administration. Originally from Helmand province in the south, he challenges the Kabul administration's claim that it represents all Afghans. He describes the key political figures in the Ghani administration who hold dual citizenship—mainly with the U.S. and other Western countries—as corrupt public servants who returned to the country from overseas simply to profiteer from the war. He claims that Afghan dual citizens are the main reason behind the rampant corruption because they and their families live abroad and do not sympathize with ordinary Afghans. Mamozai supports the view that part of the conflict in Afghanistan is a political disagreement in terms of ideology whereby the Taliban wants a Sunni religious government based on Deobandi fundamentalism under the banner of Islamic emirates (Rashid 2000: 132), but the other ethnic groups want an inclusive government that guarantee equal rights to Afghan citizens. However, the factors of injustice and inequality are also significant components of this conflict.

#### 4.4 The Future Prospects of the Afghanistan Conflict

Neither the Kabul administration nor the Taliban has a unified and coherent structure. They are coalitions of different political and military groups, and these groups' interests and goals sometimes differ. The Taliban does not have a strong and influential political faction, and the Taliban's Doha office is composed of former military commanders who were detained for years in American or Afghan prisons. The Kabul administration is a national unity government divided

between President Ghani and CEO Abdullah. However, Sayeed Mir Malak, an Afghan journalist based in Parwan, believes that all the parties that would potentially be involved in the peace process, including the Taliban, have overlapping interests, which include the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, a unitary and Kabul-centric system for the government (even the Taliban administration was based in Kabul, though their power base was in Kandahar) and bringing an end to four decades of violence. He argues that the endgame of the War in Afghanistan is about developing a “power-sharing arrangement” in the future negotiations among Afghans, as well as possible modifications to the constitution to satisfy the Taliban’s demand for the role of a stricter vision of Sharia law in the government. He adds that the current constitution is written based on Islamic Law, but the Taliban would insist on adding some of their strict interpretations of Islamic Law to the constitution, such as the separation of men and women in colleges and workplaces. The present state of the public-school system in Afghanistan is that boys and girls attend separate schools. Malak counters the argument that the Taliban, once back to power, would prevent women from studying and working by claiming that the Taliban never wanted to stop women from studying as long as they were not in contact with men outside of their family. It seems that he intentionally ignores the combination of the Taliban’s Islamic fundamentalist ideology and the traditional lifestyle of the Pashtunwali code (also known as Afghan-yat or Afghan-ness), which considers women to be the property of men; therefore, the men must protect their property by hiding it away from others (Marsden 1998).

Sadaf Ahmadi, a women’s activist based in Herat province in the west of Afghanistan, questions the view that the Taliban has changed its ideology and become more moderate toward the rights of women and minorities. Ahmadi calls women and other minority groups—the Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Sikhs— “the voiceless majority” in the peace process. She explains that ordinary Afghans are part of the voiceless majority because they cannot participate in the peace

process due to their lack of political authority. She claims that the civil society members who were selected to attend peace negotiating conferences in Moscow and Doha were hand-picked by the government, foreign countries, and the Afghan political elite; therefore, they did not echo Afghans' real concerns. She maintains that there will not be a sustainable peace if the peace deal ignores the legitimate needs and interests of the majority of the Afghan population. She states that Afghans' fundamental demands from a peace deal would be to decrease the level of violence, but the majority of Afghans (both men and women) do not want to live in an Islamic Emirate. They do not want to lose the freedom and equal rights that have been granted to them by the current constitution. Ahmadi adds that Afghanistan's minority groups do not want to be considered second-class citizens again. She contends that the U.S.-Taliban peace talks have not been transparent, which has increased religious, ethnic, and political groups' concerns over the future peace deal that might be brokered at their expense.

Ahmadi and most of the other interviewees agree that if a civil war is to be avoided, the U.S. must ensure that its peace deal with the Taliban is as transparent as possible. More importantly, in the future peace talks among Afghans, the U.S. must guarantee that it will support the fundamental needs and rights of women and religious, ethnic, and political groups if it desires to avoid a civil war.

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