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## Terrorism, International Security and the United States' Involvement in Afghanistan

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### ABSTRACT

The United States of America's foreign policy and its approach to international security experienced a significant transformation after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. These events spurred the United States of America to launch an international counterterrorism campaign, with Afghanistan becoming the central focus. The United States initiated military operations in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, to target both the Taliban regime and al-Qaeda. The initial objective of this operation was to dismantle the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. However, it resulted in persistent challenges, such as insurgency, significant civilian casualties, unstable governance, and regional instability. The study aimed to investigate the impact of the United States of America's involvement in Afghanistan on regional security, human rights, and the broader implications for international security and counterterrorism strategies. The main objectives were to investigate the rationale for the United States of America's involvement in Afghanistan and to examine the effect of the conflict on human security and the rights of Afghan civilians. The study adopted realism as the theoretical framework. The realists posit that nations act only out of self-interest and their major goal is to advance their position of power in international relations. The historical research design was applied, utilizing secondary sources of data, and the content analysis method was used as the method of data analysis. Findings show a profound impact on human security and the lives of Afghan civilians, highlighting the devastating human cost of the conflict. This involvement incurred significant human, economic, and political costs, such as civilian displacement and loss of U.S. servicemen. The study recommended that military operations should prioritize the protection of the rights of civilians and human security. This requires adherence to international humanitarian law and the implementation of stricter measures to minimize civilian harm in conflict zones.

**Keywords:** Terrorism, International Security, Taliban, United States, Counterterrorism Strategies.

### 1. Introduction

The United States of America's foreign policy and approach to international security experienced a significant transformation after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. These occurrences prompted the United States of America (U.S.A.) to commence an international counterterrorism effort, with Afghanistan emerging as the central focus of this operation (Beaud & Dagorn, 2023). The United States initiated military operations in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, to target both the Taliban regime and al-Qaeda, the organisation accountable for the 9/11 attacks. The main objectives of this intervention were to dismantle al-Qaeda and destabilise the Taliban regime, which played a crucial role in facilitating terrorist activities against multiple nations (Coll, 2018). This act of terrorism has consistently presented a substantial international threat, and its development is a form of asymmetrical warfare that requires a reassessment of traditional global security strategies (Adamu et al., 2023). The United States of America is one of the countries that has been greatly impacted by terrorism. It has witnessed multiple attacks, with the events of September 11, 2001, serving as a powerful reminder of the severe consequences (Rodríguez, 2023). Afghanistan was a major battlefield in the global war against terrorism, experiencing a prolonged period of instability since the Soviet invasion in 1979 (Coll, 2018). The US tried to establish a democratic government that could stabilise the country and prevent it from being used as a base for terrorist operations (Beaud & Dagorn, 2023), but paradoxically Afghan remained dominated by insurgency and al-Qaida fighters (Azami, 2021; Elias, 2022).

The U.S.A. successfully dismantled the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, but Osama bin Laden, the former leader of al-Qaida, managed to escape. In 2011, during President Obama's administration, U.S.A. troops successfully eliminated bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan (Coll, 2018). Although the invasion initially achieved success, Taliban and al-Qaida militants remained difficult to capture and started to reorganise within a few years after the Western-backed Hamid Karzai government took control in Kabul (Abu-Bakare, 2020). In 2005, the Taliban regained a substantial amount of their previous power and launched a violent campaign against the NATO presence (Rashid, 2012). Nevertheless, the invasion of the U.S.A. and the subsequent collapse of the Taliban regime led to significant advancements for numerous Afghans, instilling a feeling of hopefulness regarding the future of the nation. Regrettably, this optimistic perspective did not last long.

The Taliban effectively reorganised, reclaiming control over substantial territories and carrying out deadly assaults on both civilians and security forces (Jones, 2018). Amidst the conflict, the United States faced criticism for its actions, including allegations of inflicting harm on non-combatants and

subjecting detainees to torture (Sanger & Schmitt, 2018). The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was created by the United Nations Security Council in December 2001. Its purpose was to supervise military activities in Afghanistan and provide training for the Afghan National Security Forces. Hamid Karzai was designated as the President of the Afghan Interim Administration during the Bonn Conference in December 2001. The US intervention in the region has encountered various difficulties, such as persistent insurgency, weak governance, and pervasive corruption (Marsden, 2019). Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban, restructured the organisation and initiated an armed rebellion against the Afghan government and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in 2002. Eventually, in 2021, the Taliban successfully toppled the Afghan government and reinstated their rule across Afghanistan.

On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed a peace agreement that guarantees the Taliban that the country will not be used for terrorist activities. However, in the days following its signing, Taliban fighters launched dozens of attacks against Afghan security forces. US forces responded with an air strike against the Taliban in the southern province of Helmand (CFR, 2021). Intra-Afghan Peace Talks began on September 12, 2020, when Taliban representatives, the Afghan government, and civil society met for the first time in Doha, Qatar, following nearly twenty years of war. The direct negotiations, which had been delayed for months due to a prisoner swap proposed in the previous US-Taliban agreement, began after the Afghan government released 5,000 Taliban prisoners (English, 2021). On November 17, 2020, the United States announced the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. However, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg warns that withdrawing troops too soon risks turning Afghanistan into a haven for terrorists and allowing the Islamic State to rebuild its caliphate. On April 14, 2021, President Biden announced that the United States would not meet the deadline set by the US-Taliban agreement to withdraw all troops by May 1, but would instead release full withdrawal by September 11, 2021.

On August 15, 2021, the Afghan government collapsed as the Taliban took over Kabul with little resistance; Taliban fighters overran the capital, Kabul, and took over the presidential palace hours after President Ghani departed. The takeover was possible after the Taliban's rapid advance, in which they captured two of Afghanistan's provincial capitals and seized border crossings. Afghan security forces in some areas reportedly negotiated surrenders rather than fighting the Taliban (CFR, 2021). On August 26, 2021, thirteen US service members were killed in a rush to withdraw, and at least eighteen were injured in an attack at a checkpoint outside Kabul's airport, where thousands of people are being evacuated. They are the first United States service members killed in action in Afghanistan since February 2020 (Walldorf Jr, 2022). The attack also claimed the lives of at least 170 Afghan citizens. The Islamic State in Khorasan claims responsibility, and several days later, the United States launched an air strike against a suspected plotter from the group. The Pentagon later admitted that the strike was a "mistake" that killed ten civilians, seven of whom were children (CFR, 2021; Schroden, 2021). This development has raised numerous questions about the purpose and outcomes of the United States' two-decade military presence in Afghanistan. Key concerns include the US's success in Afghanistan after investing significant time and resources in the conflict-torn country (Rogin, 2021). In a 2021 interview with Deutsche Welle, Askarzada, a lecturer in the Department of Geology at Kabul University, expressed her despair over the situation;

'We lost everything that we had built in the last 20 years after the Taliban returned to power, I'm back to where I was 20 years ago and can no longer work (Shamil, 2021, p.12).

The resurgence of the Taliban signifies a notable setback to the progress achieved through the two-decade-long military involvement and counterinsurgency efforts of Western nations in Afghanistan (Bacon & Byman, 2023). Hence, it becomes pertinent to examine the U.S. role in Afghanistan and its effects on regional security, human rights, and the broader implications for counterterrorism strategies and international peace and security.

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## 2. Statement of the Problem

During the Afghan-Soviet War from 1979 - 1989, the United States, together with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, offered substantial assistance to the Afghan Mujahideen, which eventually became part of the Taliban. The United States perceived the Mujahideen as a strategy to oppose Soviet hegemony in the region and offered financial, military, and logistical assistance to these factions (Ullah et al., 2023). The help provided encompassed weaponry, and military and financial resources, all of which played a crucial part in enabling the Mujahideen to effectively oppose the Soviet forces. The backing had a consequential impact on the bolstering of the Taliban in the following years. The Taliban rose to prominence in Afghanistan, taking advantage of the political vacuum and turmoil that ensued after the departure of Soviet soldiers in 1989. In 1994, the Taliban initiated their steady advance in the southern region, taking control of several provinces along the way (Coll, 2018). The United States has concluded its two-decade-long conflict in Afghanistan, resulting in the loss of numerous lives, including both military personnel and civilians. Regrettably, Afghanistan has been relinquished to the Taliban, who have significantly augmented their power in the last 20 years, enabling them to resume their previous position and establish the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The withdrawal of troops prompted widespread protests in the United States and around the globe, as people rallied to protect the Afghan population from the oppressive rule of the Taliban. President Biden admitted that "the USA will learn from its mistakes" and that the withdrawal marks the end of "an era of major military operations to remake other countries." (Jaleel & Noor, 2023).

The proliferation of terrorism in the 21st century has emerged as a significant global issue, mostly due to the methods employed in assaults, the utilisation of explosives, and the indiscriminate devastation inflicted upon human lives and property. The American backing of the Taliban during the Afghan-Soviet conflict, followed by a subsequent two-decade war in Afghanistan, resulting in the deaths of numerous American military personnel, contractors, civilians, terrorists, and Taliban fighters, has been brought under scrutiny due to the withdrawal of American forces.

The multifaceted repercussions of the US's regional presence in Afghanistan, to displace regional powers, have resulted in substantial challenges in the country. The consequences of the USA's pullout strategy have exacerbated instability in Central Asia, thereby creating a haven for terrorism, despite the USA's prominent role in the global fight against terrorism. Therefore, it is imperative to examine how the activities of the United States in Afghanistan have led to the death of thousands of Afghan civilians heightened regional instability, and influenced global security.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical frameworks have been developed to explain state conduct in international relations. According to Doyle et al. (2020), a theory is an abstract generalisation that attempts to explain a specific phenomenon. As a result, realism has been identified as a useful theoretical lens for understanding terrorism, international security, and the United States' involvement in Afghanistan. The realist theory holds a significant position within the field of international relations. The origin of the realist school of thought can be traced to the scholarly contributions of notable thinkers such as Thucydides, Niccolo Machiavelli, and Thomas Hobbes (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016). According to Nawaz, Murtaza, and Akbar (2022), realists contend that the international system is characterised by anarchy, necessitating nations to rely on their military strength to safeguard their security and ensure their survival. According to realist scholars, the state is considered the primary actor in international relations, driven by the objective of maximising power and safeguarding national interests (Mearsheimer, 2001). Realists claim that conflict and warfare in international affairs are inescapable due to the perpetual competition among countries (Morgenthau, 1978 as cited in Nawaz, Murtaza & Akbar, 2022). Mearsheimer (2001) contended that state cooperation is transient and contingent, while international institutions and norms frequently fail to effectively regulate the behaviour of the states in international relations.

Realist theory, grounded in the belief that human nature inherently exhibits conflict and aggressiveness, has significantly influenced the foreign policy of numerous governments, particularly during periods characterised by global tension (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016). This theory emphasizes the state's primary duty as self-preservation (Ogonor, 2000). Key realist thinkers argue that power, both in its pursuit and demonstration, is central to international politics (Kumar, 2023; Yoak, 2023). Morgenthau (1978) posits that individuals inherently seek power, leading states to aim for dominance. In the same vein, Mearsheimer (2001) asserted that great powers, driven by tangible military assets, are the primary actors in this power-centric global arena. As a result, realists see power, particularly military might, as the key instrument and goal in international relations (Waltz, 2000).

From a realist standpoint, such interventions are motivated by the desire to maintain a balance of power and prevent any one country from establishing absolute control (Waltz, 2000). Recent geopolitical tensions, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, demonstrate the rise of power politics and offensive realism principles, in which governments seek hegemony to protect their security (Kumar, 2023; Yoak, 2023). In world politics, realism implies that states operate largely out of self-interest. The U.S.'s involvement in Afghanistan can be viewed through this lens, reflecting its desire to maintain global dominance and further its national interests. Realist thinkers believe that great powers, such as the U.S., are driven by a desire for dominance. Thus, America's actions in Afghanistan are not just about countering terrorism but also about ensuring its continued hegemony in global politics. In essence, the U.S.'s Afghanistan strategy is a manifestation of power politics in the international arena.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### i. The Implications of the U.S. Support for the Mujahideen During the Afghan-Soviet War and the Ensuing Rise of the Taliban

The U.S. support for the Mujahideen during the Afghan-Soviet war in 1979 raises critical questions about the unintended consequences of foreign intervention, especially regarding the subsequent rise of the Taliban (Hayden, 2021). As a strategic move against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the U.S. in the late 1970s, began supporting the Mujahideen, leading to the Soviet Union's engagement in a prolonged guerrilla war in Afghanistan. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), through Operation Cyclone, funnelled billions in arms and aid to the Mujahideen, marking it as one of the agency's most extensive and costly covert operations (Ferreza, 2022). However, the U.S. did not directly engage with the Mujahideen but used Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency as an intermediary, which consequently had significant influence over the distribution of funds and weapons (Hayden, 2021).

The Taliban's emergence came in the aftermath of the Afghan-Soviet war when the country was in destruction, and a power vacuum was created as different Mujahideen factions including Some Taliban leaders, such as Mullah Omar, and Mujahideen veterans began to fight each other (Jones, 2020). The Taliban's rise and the genesis of the current Afghan conflict were, to a large extent, due to global apathy towards the plight of Afghanistan (Bhutta, 2002). Moreover, due to the U.S.'s reliance on Pakistan's ISI as an intermediary, Pakistan gained significant influence over Afghan affairs. The ISI, aiming to counter Indian influence in post-Soviet Afghanistan, supported the Taliban as a stabilizing, pro-Pakistan force (Barman, 2022). The Afghan-Soviet war and its aftermath led to a significant refugee crisis as Afghans sought to escape the violence, causing demographic shifts and social pressures in neighbouring countries that persist today (Bhutta, 2002).

The rise of the Taliban had broader implications for regional security. Notably, the Taliban provided a haven for Al Qaeda, a transnational extremist group that planned the 9/11 terrorist attacks from Afghanistan. This placed Afghanistan at the centre of global counter-terrorism efforts and initiated the U.S. invasion in 2001, the impacts of which continue to affect regional stability and global geopolitics. This situation underlines the complex web of intervention, blowback, and unintended consequences that often accompany foreign involvement in internal conflicts. While the U.S. support for the Mujahideen was initially seen as a successful strategy in countering Soviet expansion, the long-term impacts have been profoundly destabilizing. It also emphasizes the dangers of proxy warfare. By channelling its support through Pakistan, the U.S. gave the ISI a significant amount of control over who received funds and weapons. This, in turn, allowed Pakistan to promote groups aligned with its interests, rather than those of Afghanistan or the international community (Hayden, 2021).

The U.S.'s decision to support the Mujahideen was primarily driven by Cold War geopolitics, with Afghanistan becoming a battleground for superpower rivalry. However, the narrow focus on countering Soviet influence led to a lack of foresight regarding the broader implications of such support. The militarization of Afghan society, facilitated by the influx of U.S. arms and funding, had profound consequences for the post-war socio-political landscape of Afghanistan (Smith, 2019). While the immediate objective of bleeding the Soviet Union dry was achieved, the U.S. significantly underestimated the long-term repercussions of its actions. The empowerment of Islamist extremist groups, the destabilization of the region, and the subsequent emergence of the Taliban can all be traced back, at least in part, to U.S. intervention during the Afghan-Soviet war (Smith, 2019).

The U.S.'s reliance on Pakistan's ISI as an intermediary in the conflict had its own set of unintended consequences. This strategic choice, while pragmatic in the short term, allowed Pakistan to shape the outcome of the Afghan-Soviet war to its benefit. The ISI's support for certain Mujahideen factions over others, based on its regional interests, also played a significant role in the post-war power dynamics that eventually led to the rise of the Taliban (Khan, Hassan & Raza, 2023). This rise according to Ibrahim and Akbarzadeh (2020), triggered the spread of the Jihadist movement. The narrative of Jihad, which was aggressively propagated during the conflict, persisted in its influence into the aftermath, providing extreme factions with a strong ideological underpinning. The perceived effectiveness of the Mujahideen in their resistance against the Soviet Union, which was further strengthened by the backing provided by the United States, served as a catalyst for Islamist extremists throughout the globe (Hayden, 2021). This had a significant role in the emergence and proliferation of jihadist groups on a global scale (Bashar, 2021). The United States' provision of assistance to the Mujahideen yielded the desired outcomes in the short term; but, the enduring ramifications of this involvement have been extensive and significant. The Afghan-Soviet conflict and its subsequent consequences serve as a poignant illustration of the nature and possible drawbacks of international interventions. This shows the need to adopt a comprehensive, enduring position before embarking upon these types of initiatives.

## ii. The Consequences of United States involvement in Afghanistan

The war in Afghanistan which lasted for two decades, had enormous consequences on human lives and properties. Loss of lives and injuries are among the most direct and visible consequences of any conflict, and the situation in Afghanistan is no exception. In 2019 alone, according to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) data, 3,403 civilians lost their lives and another 6,989 were injured (UNAMA, 2021). This data only covers recorded instances and the actual figures could potentially be much higher given the challenges in data collection in conflict zones. It is imperative to critically examine these figures to comprehend the magnitude and consequences of this human loss. First, the high number of civilian casualties reflects the intensity and nature of the conflict, with constant fighting, airstrikes, suicide bombings, and Improved Explosive Device (IED) attacks making civilians frequent victims. Non-combatants are not just "collateral damage" in this conflict, they are often directly targeted by the warring parties, both the Taliban and other insurgent groups, as well as government forces. These casualties have broader societal implications. The death or injury of a family member can push households into poverty due to loss of income and increased medical costs, creating a vicious cycle of economic hardship and vulnerability (Minoia, Mumtaz & Pain, 2015). Moreover, high casualty rates contribute to a climate of fear and insecurity, exacerbating mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Ventevogel et al., 2012). It is important to highlight the impact of civilian casualties on social fabric and community. The loss of human life on such a scale contributes to social instability, erodes community structures, and fuels grievances and violence (Barfield, 2010). The civilian casualties are not just statistics; they represent a devastating human tragedy with long-lasting socio-economic and psychological impacts on Afghan society. In Afghanistan, women and children were seriously hit by the conflict, figure I shows the number of women and children that were killed as a result of the conflict.

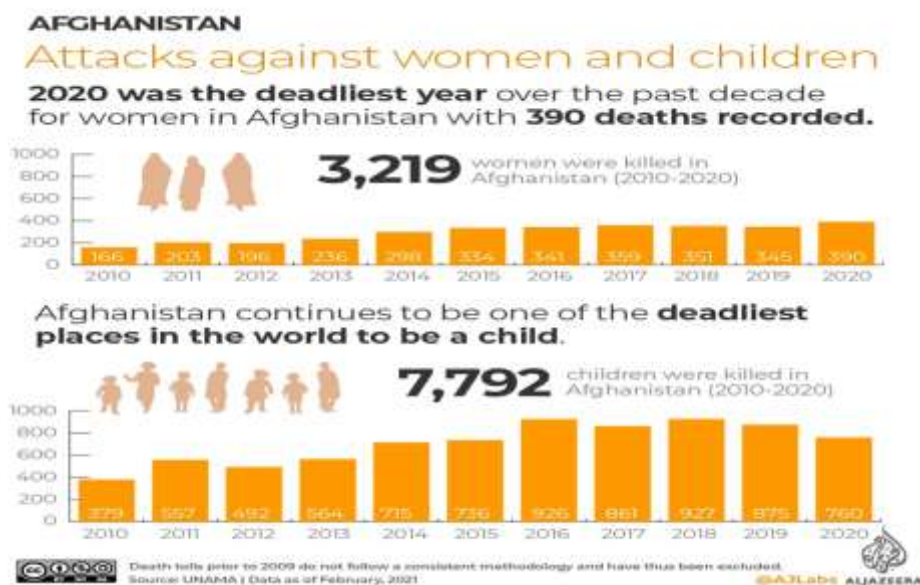


Figure I: The Attacks and Death of Women and Children in Afghanistan

Source: (Ajazeera, 2021)

Figure 1 presents a grim graphical representation of the number of deaths among women and children in Afghanistan between 2010 and 2020, summarising ten years of violence in clear numerical terms. Upon initial observation, the bar charts swiftly conveyed the increasing dangers encountered by these vulnerable populations, with the year 2020 identified as the most lethal for women over this period. A worrisome total of 3,219 women and 7,792 children were documented to have been killed, highlighting Afghanistan's tragic reputation as one of the most dangerous countries for these vulnerable populations of women and children. The above figure employed the use of silhouettes of women and children to distinguish between the two groups. This design decision adds a human element to the data, converting impersonal figures into a visual story of human tragedy. This visualisation method effectively emphasises the gendered aspect of violence and the targeted victimisation of children, bringing focus to the varying effects of conflict on different demographic groups. The designation of 2020 as the most lethal year for women implies a significant increase in fatalities that necessitates a thorough investigation of the atrocities committed on innocent civilians. Such a sharp rise calls for a more comprehensive analysis of the underlying factors contributing to this alarming number. Following this is the total number of all the civilians that were killed in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2021, this was recorded by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.

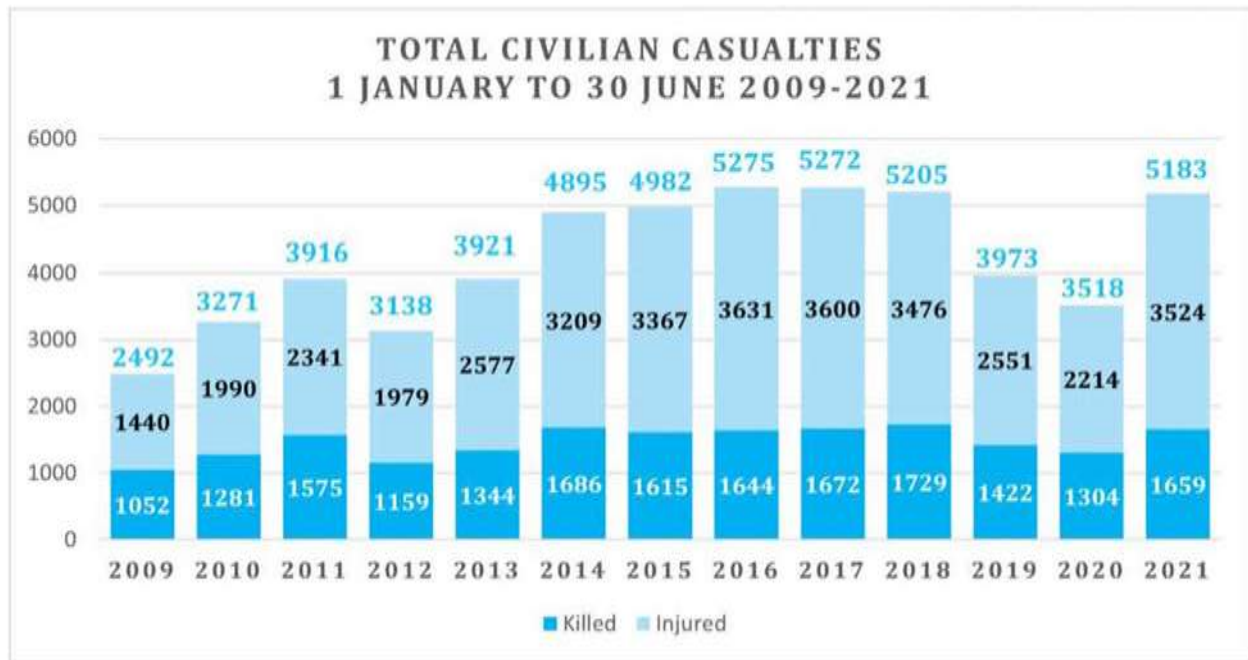
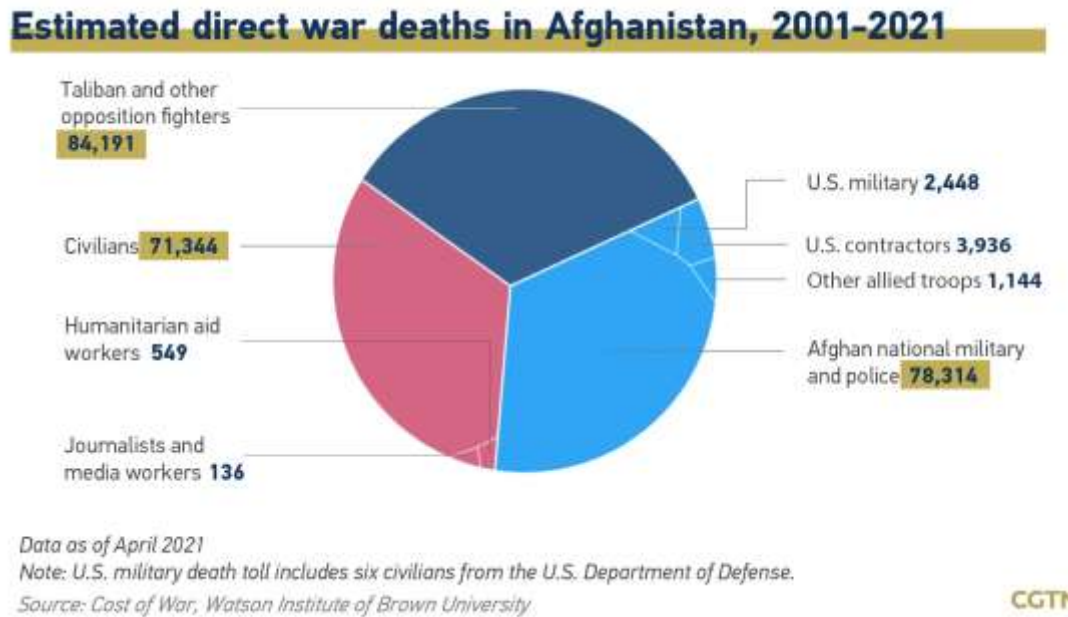


Figure II: The Total Civilian Casualties in Afghanistan from 2009 - 2021

Source: (UNAMA, 2021)

Figure II illustrates the harsh truth of civilian casualties in Afghanistan, specifically from January to June, spanning the years 2009 to 2021. The bar chart systematically divides the figures into fatalities and injuries, offering a visual and numerical examination of the human casualties annually. A notable observation is the significant disparity between the number of civilian injuries and fatalities, which remains stable over the years. This not only indicates the immediate effects of the battle but also suggests the enduring consequences for Afghan society, as injuries can lead to disabilities that have long-lasting effects on people, families, and communities beyond the initial incident. The data reveals variations in both fatalities and casualties throughout the years, without any evident trajectory towards a decline, signifying the enduring instability and danger of being in a region affected by violence. The years 2014 to 2016 demonstrate a significant rise in both deaths and injuries, indicating a period of notably intense combat or a shift in the character of the battles. This shows the extent and magnitude of human suffering in a country plagued by violence. However, a more comprehensive report is needed to show how US soldier, humanitarian aid workers, and US military contractors lost their lives in Afghanistan. This significant death toll collected by the Watson Institute of Brown University in 2021 shows the dire consequences of the US involvement in Afghanistan.



**Figure 1II. Showing the Estimated Direct War Deaths in Afghanistan from 2001 – 2021**

**Source: (Watson Institute of Brown University, 2021)**

Figure III presents a clear and striking visual depiction of the number of human lives lost as a result of the conflict in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. The pie chart categorises the estimated direct deaths caused by the war. This visual tool represents the distribution of deaths among different groups, such as the Taliban, opposition fighters, Afghan civilians, humanitarian workers, journalists, U.S. military personnel, contractors, other allied troops, and Afghan national military and police. Closely look at the chart is the notable percentage of fatalities among Taliban and opposition combatants, followed by Afghan national military and police forces and then civilians. The significant civilian death toll, exceeding 71,000, is particularly worrisome serving as a solemn reminder of the catastrophic effects of war on individuals not involved in combat. The comparatively smaller portions symbolising the fatalities of humanitarian aid workers and journalists emphasise the hazardous conditions they face while operating in areas of armed conflict. The chart serves as a powerful reminder of the diverse aspects of the Afghan conflict, impacting not just the fighters but also the journalists and aid workers involved in reporting and providing assistance. The incorporation of fatalities among U.S. military personnel and contractors, along with those of allied troops, highlights the international scope of the conflict and the global impact of the war in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the chart's attempt to condense the conflict into numerical information may oversimplify its intricate nature, potentially concealing the nuanced and qualitative elements of the conflict. Ivanov, Bozakova and Balieva (2020) asserted that there are indications of a significant increase in civilian casualties resulting from the war, primarily due to hunger, disease, and starvation. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, Afghanistan remains among the "deadliest places in the world to be a civilian (UN, 2020).

### iii. The Reasons for the Withdrawal of U.S. Troops from Afghanistan

The decision by the United States to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, which was largely finalized under President Donald Trump's administration and carried out by President Joe Biden in 2021, has far-reaching implications both for Afghanistan and for the broader region (Snyder, 2023; Al-Shamiri & Hassan, 2023). The withdrawal decision was influenced by several factors, which can be broadly grouped into strategic, financial, and political considerations.

**Strategic Considerations:** the strategic considerations that led to the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan have been the subject of extensive debate. The primary objective of the United States operation was to dismantle the terrorist organisation known as al-Qaeda and then remove the Taliban regime that provided them with refuge. Nevertheless, as the duration of the conflict prolonged and the security situation continued to exhibit continuous volatility, inquiries emerged about the strategic significance of keeping a military establishment inside the nation. The assassination of Osama bin Laden in 2011 has significant importance in this context. The operation accomplished its initial objective of apprehending the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks with the death of bin Laden. This achievement prompted several members of the United States administration to reevaluate the strategic imperative of maintaining their ongoing involvement in Afghanistan. This reconsideration was prompted by the recognition that the United States' aims in Afghanistan had progressively grown less defined as time went on. An additional crucial element in this strategic calculation was the significant financial burden imposed by the conflict. According to Khurami (2023), there has been a growing scepticism among U.S. officials over the strategic benefits of maintaining a costly military presence in a nation where the likelihood of achieving a decisive triumph seems minimal. The battle had not only financial expenses but also personal costs, as a significant number of American troops suffered fatalities or sustained injuries. The justification for the military presence in Afghanistan has grown more challenging due to the growing difficulty in reconciling the associated costs and benefits. (Hameed, Rahman & Khanam, 2023)



The dynamic shifts in the geopolitical scene have had a significant impact on the formulation of strategic considerations. In response to increasing competition from major global powers such as China and Russia, the United States deemed it imperative to allocate resources and focus towards other strategic considerations. The protracted conflict in Afghanistan, sometimes referred to as the "forever war," has been widely seen as a diversionary engagement that hindered the United States' ability to address several urgent security concerns (Blinken, 2021). It's essential to note that the decision to withdraw was also influenced by domestic considerations. The American public's support for the war had significantly declined over the years. Political leaders, recognizing this shift in public sentiment, were more open to ending the military engagement in Afghanistan (Parker et al., 2019).

**Political Considerations:** certainly, shifting domestic politics in the U.S. played a significant part in the decision to withdraw. Over time, the war in Afghanistan lost its initial wide public support. According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2021, about two-thirds of U.S. adults (69%) said the U.S. should not be conducting military operations in Afghanistan, marking a clear shift in public opinion from the early years of the war (Pew Research Center, 2021). This disillusionment with the conflict stemmed from several factors. One of the most prominent is the perceived lack of clear progress despite the cost to American lives and resources. According to the Department of Defence (2021) as cited by Bozzay et al. (2023), the United States has had a loss of more than 2,300 military personnel in Afghanistan as of April 2021, along with a significant number of individuals sustaining injuries. Moreover, the economic burden of the conflict was immense. Based on research conducted by the Costs of Conflict Project at Brown University, the financial expenditure incurred by the United States as a result of the conflict has surpassed \$2 trillion as of the year 2020 (Crawford & Lutz, 2021; Bilmes, 2021). Alongside the concrete losses, there was an increasingly prevalent impression that the goals of the war had become ambiguous and unachievable. The primary objective of destroying Al-Qaeda and imposing consequences on the Taliban for providing them with refuge had been mostly accomplished, as shown by the considerable weakening of Al-Qaeda and the elimination of Osama Bin Laden in 2011. Nevertheless, the ensuing endeavour of nation-building has shown itself to be somewhat demanding, characterised by a gradual and often reversible advancement (Bajoria & Sinha, 2021).

Politicians reacted to the evolving popular attitudes. The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan emerged as a matter of bipartisan concern, as seen by the commitment and efforts of presidents from both the Democratic and Republican parties, including Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden, to bring an end to the conflict (Haass, 2021; Ashford, 2021). The efforts undertaken by individuals demonstrated an increasing agreement that the United States' interests and resources might be more effectively used by shifting focus and allocating funding towards other urgent matters, both inside the country and on the international scene. Indeed, the broader impact of the political considerations extended beyond the domestic U.S. arena, playing a significant role in international diplomacy and regional power dynamics as well.

The war in Afghanistan had long ceased to be a purely domestic issue for the U.S. It had become entangled with the country's broader foreign policy, affecting its relations with other states in the region, such as Pakistan, Iran, and China. Therefore, the decision to withdraw was, in part, a reflection of the need to redirect the U.S.'s strategic focus towards more pressing global challenges, such as the rise of China, which requires a significant reallocation of resources and political capital (Waldman, 2020; Schutte, 2021). The decision also represented an acknowledgement of the limitations of military intervention as a tool for achieving political objectives. The difficulty of establishing a stable, democratic government in Afghanistan despite years of military engagement and billions of dollars in aid highlighted the complexities of nation-building and the limits of external influence, particularly in a context characterized by deeply entrenched social, political, and cultural changes. Figure II below shows the financial cost of the war in Afghanistan.



**Figure IV: Budgetary Costs of the U.S. War in Afghanistan, 2001-2022**

**Sources:** (Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs, 2022)

Figure IV above shows that the United States has spent \$2.313 trillion on the war since entering Afghanistan in 2001. This figure includes funding for operations in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. This sum does not account for future payments of interest on money borrowed to wage the war, nor does it

include the cost of providing lifelong care for American soldiers of this conflict. The amount spent in Afghanistan (\$2.313 trillion) is a fraction of the projected overall cost of the wars that have been waged after 9/11. The opportunity cost of the war – what could have been achieved had these vast sums been spent elsewhere – adds another dimension to the financial considerations. The resources devoted to Afghanistan could have been channelled to pressing domestic priorities, such as infrastructure development, education, healthcare, and research and development, which could potentially yield more durable benefits for American society. Hence, the decision to withdraw troops reflects not just an acknowledgement of the financial strain imposed by the war but also a strategic decision to reallocate resources in a manner that better serves the U.S. interests (Yom, 2020). The drawdown, in this sense, can be seen as an attempt to redefine American power and influence away from expensive military engagements towards more sustainable and productive investments.

#### iv. The Consequences of the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan

**The resurgence of Taliban:** The resurgence of the Taliban following the U.S. withdrawal represents one of the most significant consequences of this pivotal decision. As U.S. troops departed from the nation, the Taliban quickly filled the vacuum, consolidating power at a startlingly rapid pace. The swift Taliban takeover has raised serious concerns about the ability of the Afghan government and security forces to maintain control and stability without the backing of U.S. military support (, 2021). The ease with which the Taliban assumed power also frankly highlighted the precariousness of the Afghan state, calling into question the durability and effectiveness of the institutions that the U.S. and its allies had spent two decades and considerable resources to build. The vision was to create a stable, democratic Afghanistan that could resist the influence of extremist groups. However, the prompt collapse of the government in the face of Taliban advances indicates deep-seated issues in the political and military infrastructure of the country that remained unresolved despite years of international aid and training (Carlisle, 2022; Ameyaw-Brobby, 2023). The swift Taliban takeover further illustrates how external military interventions can unintentionally exacerbate instability if not paired with a comprehensive and locally-driven political strategy. Critics argue that the U.S. focused heavily on military solutions at the expense of political and diplomatic efforts to foster a durable peace (Shahid, 2022). Sullivan (2022) posited that while the U.S. was successful in building a formidable Afghan army on paper, it failed to ensure the loyalty and commitment of these forces to the Afghan government. Many Afghan soldiers, feeling little allegiance to a corrupt and distant government, chose not to fight the Taliban, leading to the rapid collapse of the Afghan forces (King, 2023; Malkasian, 2021).

**Regional instability:** the sudden power vacuum and subsequent Taliban takeover in Afghanistan has had ripple effects beyond its borders, contributing to regional instability. The return of a hardline Islamist regime in Afghanistan has raised fears of increased terrorist activity and inspired similar extremist groups globally (Gillani, 2023). Neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asian states are particularly concerned about the potential spillover of violence, militancy, and refugee flows into their territories (Gillani, 2023). The crisis has created geopolitical shifts, Afghanistan has become a point of contention among major powers like the U.S., Russia, and China, each with its interests and stakes in the region (BBC, 2021). China, for instance, is worried about the impact of its Belt and Road Initiative and potential threats to its Xinjiang province (Sahakyan et al., 2022; Syed, Asif & Khan, 2022). At the same time, it sees an opportunity in the crisis to increase its influence in the region (BBC, 2021; Zhang, 2023). The crisis has also raised questions about the future role and reliability of the United States as a global power and security provider. The abrupt withdrawal and its disorganized execution have damaged the U.S.'s credibility among its allies and partners, potentially leading to shifts in global alliances and strategic calculations (Kupchan, 2021). The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and the consequent rise of the Taliban have had profound and far-reaching implications. These range from the immediate humanitarian crisis and severe violations of human rights within the country to broader geopolitical shifts and regional instability. The full extent of these impacts will only become apparent in the years to come.

**Counterterrorism efforts:** the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan has ushered in a new era of uncertainty regarding the landscape of counterterrorism efforts in the region. One of the primary objectives of the U.S.'s intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 was the dismantlement of Al-Qaeda and preventing the country from becoming a base for international terrorism. However, the withdrawal has opened a Pandora's box of security challenges that could potentially counteract the progress made over the last two decades (Byman, 2021). The swift resurgence of the Taliban has signalled the possibility of Afghanistan once again becoming a sanctuary for global terrorist organizations, as it was before the U.S. invasion. Although the Taliban has asserted that it would not allow Afghan soil to be used for planning attacks on other countries (Bacon & Byman, 2023), their assurances have been met with scepticism. Their past alliances with Al-Qaeda, and more recently with groups like the Haqqani network, raise questions about their commitment to deterring terrorism (Waldman, 2020). The rise of the Taliban could potentially galvanize other extremist groups globally, promoting a narrative of victory over a superpower. This could act as a catalyst for recruitment and radicalization, leading to an increase in global terrorism.

**Spillover of Violence:** the spread of violence and instability from Afghanistan to its neighbouring nations is a grave concern following the exit of the United States of America. Afghanistan's geographic position renders it a pivotal confluence in Central and South Asia, sharing borders with several nations, each facing significant security, socio-political, and economic challenges, these nations include Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and China (Shahi, 2022).

According to Nazari and Noori (2022), historically, Afghanistan has experienced instability and has had substantial effects across its borders. Of particular significance is the influence on Pakistan, a country that shares the volatile and porous Durand Line with Afghanistan. (Shahi, 2022) demonstrated how the instability and conflict in Afghanistan have traditionally spread into Pakistan, enabling the movement of terrorists, causing refugee problems, and adding to the general destabilisation of the region. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan and the resulting instability may once again enable the cross-border movement of extremist groups, consequently intensifying security risks in Pakistan and other areas. Moreover, the circumstances in Afghanistan have significant consequences for Iran, given its extensive record of hostile relations with the Taliban and its role as a host to millions of Afghan refugees (Loft, 2021). Iran might potentially experience a surge of refugees seeking safety from violence and persecution, which has the potential



to further burden its already limited resources. In addition, the Taliban's Sunni Islamist ideology is a cause for worry for Shia Iran, as it apprehends the possible escalation of sectarian conflict.

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, along with other Central Asian countries, also will encounter substantial risks. Both countries have contiguous borders with Afghanistan and have expressed concerns regarding the proliferation of extremism and instability (Akmalov, 2021; Sullivan, 2021). The spread of violence may intensify preexisting tensions and contribute to social and political instability. China, which has a small border with Afghanistan, will also face serious security consequences due to the withdrawal of the United States. China's interests in Afghanistan and the wider Central Asian region are substantial and diverse (Ali, 2022). with important consequences arising from the exit of the United States. The issue can be divided into two main aspects - security and economic.

According to Mustafa et al. (2020), China is greatly concerned about the possibility of worsening the current instability in its Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. China's border with Afghanistan is both short and strategically significant. The instability that has followed the exit of U.S.A. forces raises concerns about the potential entrance of Uyghur terrorists. These insurgents, possibly affiliated with the Taliban or other extremist groups, have the potential to escalate the separatist activities in Xinjiang, a situation that China is eager to prevent (Mustafa et al., 2020). China's economic ambitions in Afghanistan are primarily driven by its extensive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Ghosh, 2023). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aims to enhance economic influence in Asia through substantial expenditures on infrastructure. Nevertheless, the instability and unpredictability in Afghanistan following the exit of the United States could present significant risks to the prosperity and safety of these investments. Therefore, China's economic aspirations must provide a certain level of stability in Afghanistan (Ghosh, 2023). The diffusion of violence and instability emanating from Afghanistan presents a substantial threat to the stability of the surrounding region. The effects are not limited to the immediate spread of violence but also include socio-economic outcomes such as refugee problems, worsening of sectarian tensions, and interruptions to the economy. Hence, it is imperative for the neighbouring countries, in collaboration with the global society, to tackle the developing circumstances in Afghanistan to avert the escalation of instability within the region.

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## Conclusion

This study on U.S. involvement in Afghanistan offers a profound reflection on the challenges of foreign interventions and their long-term implications. Tracing the trajectory from the U.S.'s support for the Mujahideen to the eventual rise of the Taliban and the subsequent regional consequences, it underscores the necessity of a comprehensive understanding of international intervention. The human and socio-economic costs of the conflict serve as a poignant reminder of the real-world consequences of geopolitical decisions. As the global community grapples with the ever-evolving challenge of terrorism, the lessons from Afghanistan stand as a testament to the need for a more holistic, informed, and collaborative approach. Addressing the root causes of extremism, fostering international cooperation, and prioritizing human rights are paramount. The experiences and insights gleaned from this study should serve as a beacon, guiding future strategies and interventions to ensure a more stable and secure international community.

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## Policy Recommendations

Drawing upon the findings and insights of this study on the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, the following recommendations were made;

- i. Reflecting on the U.S. support of the Mujahideen, it is recommended that future support in foreign conflicts should be more strategic. This includes assessing potential long-term impacts, such as the possibility for radical groups like the Taliban to gain power. It also necessitates a keen understanding of the regional socio-political dynamics to avoid inadvertently fuelling future conflicts
- ii. A critical element that often fuels resentment and extremism is the perceived exploitation of less developed regions by Western powers. Western nations, particularly the U.S., should acknowledge this history and actively work towards rectifying past injustices. It's important to transition from exploitative relationships to partnerships that promote mutual growth and development.
- iii. The study highlights the regional instability that followed the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. To prevent such scenarios in the future, a comprehensive exit strategy should be developed before any intervention. This strategy should ensure the establishment of a stable, self-reliant, and inclusive government to prevent power vacuums and potential escalation of violence.
- iv. Future counterterrorism efforts should focus on dismantling the organizational structure of these extremist groups, countering their narratives, and addressing the socio-economic factors that contribute to their rise.

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