

## STRATEGIC MISSTEPS AND THE PRISONER'S DILEMMA: ANALYSING THE UNITED STATES' PROLONGED ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

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### Abstract

*This study examines the strategic failure of the United States' intervention in Afghanistan (2001–2021) through the analytical lens of game theory, specifically the Prisoner's Dilemma. The research asks: why did cooperation between the United States, its allies, regional actors, and Afghan stakeholders repeatedly fail despite shared interests in stabilizing Afghanistan? Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative case study combined with a conceptual application of game theory, using historical analysis and secondary sources to interpret strategic interactions among key actors, including the United States, NATO allies, the Afghan government, the Taliban, and regional powers such as Pakistan. The Prisoner's Dilemma framework is operationalized by identifying actors, strategies, and strategic payoffs that shaped decision-making during different phases of the conflict. The findings suggest that persistent mistrust, competing strategic interests, and short-term incentive structures led actors to repeatedly choose defection over cooperation. These dynamics produced a series of suboptimal outcomes that prolonged the conflict and undermined long-term stabilization efforts. The study concludes that the failure of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan cannot be explained solely by military limitations but rather by structural cooperation failures within a multi-actor strategic environment.*

### Keywords

Prisoner's Dilemma, Taliban, Intervention, Strategies, Conflict Resolution.

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## **Introduction**

At the start of the 21st century, the U.S. and NATO forces engaged in extensive operations in Afghanistan, sanctioned by UN Security Council resolutions (Leurdijk, 2005). Despite the scale and duration of this involvement, which ranks as one of the costliest in modern history, the results in terms of conflict resolution were far from promising. The financial cost of the war surpassed one trillion dollars, marking an unprecedented expenditure (Belasco, 2009). Equally staggering was the human toll, with thousands of casualties among allied forces and an even higher number of Afghan deaths and injuries. Despite being a global military superpower, the U.S. struggled to resolve the conflict and minimize these losses. Various strategies were implemented, yet the intended goals remained elusive. This section examines the key reasons behind the failure of U.S. strategies in achieving conflict resolution in Afghanistan (Leurdijk, 2005).

The U.S. employed a mix of hard and soft power strategies, with the U.S. leading the efforts and assigning secondary roles to its allies. After the initial military success against the Taliban-backed Al-Qaeda, the U.S. pursued a complex agenda in Afghanistan. According to then-Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, part of the U.S. strategy involved the development of large communication and radar installations near Afghanistan's western borders with Iran, utilizing military bases in Bagram and Shindand. However, these strategies were often a source of contention among allies, as reflected in various international conferences (Thomas, 2018).

Although the U.S. achieved some secondary objectives, such as dismantling parts of Al-Qaeda, the primary goal of defeating the Taliban and establishing long-term peace in Afghanistan was not realized. The failure of U.S. strategies can be attributed to several

critical factors. Initially, from 2001 to 2003, the U.S. saw rapid military success with the collapse of the Taliban regime, which led to a declaration of victory over terrorist forces like Al-Qaeda and their Taliban allies. This success allowed the U.S. to begin its broader anti-terror campaign in Afghanistan's outlying regions (Jalali, 2001). However, the absence of a coherent long-term strategy and the inability to adapt to Afghanistan's complex socio-political dynamics contributed significantly to the eventual failure. The challenges faced by the U.S. intervention cannot be explained solely by insufficient resources. Given the scale of financial expenditures and troop deployments, the problem was less about resource scarcity and more about institutional capacity, governance challenges, and strategic misalignment between international objectives and Afghanistan's political realities.

This study seeks to answer the following research question: Why did cooperation repeatedly fail among the key actors involved in Afghanistan despite shared incentives to stabilize the country? More specifically, the article investigates how the strategic interactions between the United States, NATO allies, the Afghan government, regional actors, and the Taliban can be interpreted through the framework of the Prisoner's Dilemma. By applying this game-theoretic perspective, the study aims to explain how mistrust, misaligned incentives, and short-term strategic calculations contributed to the prolonged failure of stabilization efforts.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the existing literature on international intervention, state-building, and strategic failure in Afghanistan. The subsequent section outlines the theoretical framework, focusing on the application of game theory and the Prisoner's Dilemma to international conflict dynamics. The methodology section then explains the qualitative research design and sources

used in the analysis. The empirical sections examine key strategic decisions made by the United States and other actors during the conflict. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings and discusses the broader theoretical implications for understanding cooperation failures in international interventions.

## **Literature Review**

A substantial body of literature has examined the causes of the failure of international intervention and state-building efforts in Afghanistan. Scholars have highlighted multiple explanations, including institutional weakness, regional geopolitical competition, and the limitations of externally imposed governance structures.

One strand of literature focuses on the challenges of state-building and governance in Afghanistan. Rubin (2013) and Suhrke (2013) argue that attempts to construct a centralized state structure failed because they overlooked Afghanistan's historically decentralized political system and tribal power structures. Similarly, Barfield (2013) emphasizes that Afghanistan's political stability has traditionally depended on negotiated power-sharing among local elites rather than centralized authority.

Another line of research examines the strategic failures of the U.S. intervention. Rashid (2008) and Jones (2010) argue that the U.S. strategy suffered from shifting objectives, ranging from counterterrorism to state-building, without a coherent long-term framework. These strategic inconsistencies created uncertainty among both domestic and international actors involved in the intervention.

A third perspective emphasizes the role of regional geopolitical dynamics, particularly Pakistan's strategic interests in Afghanistan. According to Coll (2018) and Fair (2010),

Pakistan's support for Taliban factions was motivated by concerns about Indian influence in Afghanistan, thereby complicating the U.S. counterinsurgency strategy.

Despite these valuable contributions, relatively few studies apply formal strategic interaction frameworks to explain the behavior of actors involved in the Afghan conflict. This study seeks to address this gap by applying the Prisoner's Dilemma model from game theory to analyze how mistrust and competing incentives among multiple actors contributed to repeated failures of cooperation.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative case study approach combined with a theory-driven analytical framework. The research interprets the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan (2001–2021) as a strategic interaction among multiple actors, analyzed through the conceptual lens of game theory. The study relies primarily on secondary data, including academic literature, policy reports, government documents, and historical analyses of the Afghan conflict. These sources provide empirical material for examining key strategic decisions taken by the United States, NATO allies, the Afghan government, and regional actors.

The analytical method involves applying the Prisoner's Dilemma model as an interpretive framework. The study identifies the main actors (players), the strategic choices available to them (cooperation or defection), and the potential payoffs associated with these choices. Rather than constructing a formal mathematical model, the framework is used to interpret patterns of behavior observed during the conflict. This approach allows the study to explore how mistrust, uncertainty, and competing incentives influenced strategic decision-making, ultimately producing outcomes that were suboptimal for all actors involved.

## **Theoretical Understanding**

The strategic failure of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan can be critically examined through the lens of game theory, particularly the concept of the Prisoner's Dilemma. Game theory is a mathematical framework for analyzing situations of conflict and cooperation between rational actors. It aims to predict the outcomes of strategic interactions by considering the decisions made by individuals or groups with opposing or aligned interests (Myerson, 1991). The Prisoner's Dilemma is one of the most well-known models in game theory, offering profound insights into decision-making processes that involve cooperation and competition between parties. This framework is highly relevant when exploring the prolonged U.S. and NATO military involvement in Afghanistan and the failure to achieve long-term strategic objectives.

The Prisoner's Dilemma typically involves two players who must choose between two strategies: cooperation or defection. The dilemma is structured such that if both players cooperate, they receive moderate but mutually beneficial outcomes. However, if one player defects while the other cooperates, the defector gains a higher reward while the cooperator incurs a significant loss. When both defect, both parties end up with worse outcomes than if they had cooperated (Axelrod, 1984).

This interaction highlights a paradox in which rational actors, driven by self-interest, often fail to cooperate even when collaboration would lead to a better outcome for both (Rapoport, 1965). Applied to international conflicts like the Afghanistan intervention, this framework provides a means of analyzing how strategic decisions, mistrust, and conflicting interests among nations can lead to suboptimal outcomes.

In the context of the U.S. and NATO’s military campaign in Afghanistan, the Prisoner’s Dilemma illustrates the complex strategic environment faced by international actors involved in the conflict. Although the overarching goal was to defeat the Taliban and stabilize Afghanistan, different stakeholders had divergent interests, leading to fragmented decision-making. The absence of coordinated long-term cooperation and the competing short-term goals among coalition forces can be conceptualized as a multi-level Prisoner’s Dilemma, where each actor’s choices undermined collective success (Lindsay & Holmes, 2012).

To operationalize the Prisoner’s Dilemma in the Afghan case, the strategic interaction between the United States and the Taliban can be simplified into two strategic options: cooperation (negotiation and political settlement) or defection (continued military confrontation).

|                 | Taliban Cooperate                                                            | Taliban Defect                                                         |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| U.S. Cooperates | Negotiated settlement, shared political framework (moderate payoff for both) | Taliban gains political legitimacy while U.S. loses strategic leverage |
| U.S. Defects    | U.S. achieves temporary military advantage while Taliban suffers losses      | Prolonged conflict with high costs for both actors                     |

In this structure, the Nash equilibrium emerges when both actors choose defection, resulting in prolonged conflict despite the possibility that mutual cooperation could have produced a more stable outcome. The persistent lack of trust between the actors prevented the emergence of cooperative strategies, reinforcing the continuation of military confrontation.

## **1. U.S. and NATO Cooperation: Internal Fragmentation and Misaligned Interests**

While the U.S. and NATO initially appeared unified in their goals (toppling Taliban regime, dismantling Al-Qaeda network and Statebuilding in Afghanistan), their cooperation was marred by internal disagreements on how to achieve those objectives. NATO members held different views on the appropriate levels of military engagement, use of resources, and broader strategic aims. For example, some European nations were reluctant to commit large numbers of troops or engage in combat operations, preferring to focus on reconstruction efforts and civilian aid (Jones, 2010). Meanwhile, the U.S. oscillated between different strategies, from large-scale counterinsurgency efforts to “light-footprint” counterterrorism operations (Gordon, 2010). These divergent approaches reflect the core of the Prisoner’s Dilemma: while cooperation would have led to more consistent and effective strategies, each actor prioritized its own national interests or short-term gains, leading to a lack of cohesive and sustained cooperation.

## **2. The Taliban as a Strategic Player: The Failure of "Defection" by the U.S.**

The Taliban, as a key player in the conflict, can also be seen through the lens of the Prisoner’s Dilemma. From the outset, the U.S. viewed the Taliban as an irreconcilable enemy to be defeated militarily, rather than a potential partner in a political solution. By refusing to engage diplomatically in meaningful ways with the Taliban during the early stages of the conflict, the U.S. essentially chose a strategy of “defection” in the Prisoner’s Dilemma framework (Rubin, 2013). This decision hindered the possibility of any initial cooperation that could have led to a political settlement or minimized prolonged conflict.

On the Taliban's side, they too often defected by avoiding negotiations and choosing continued insurgency. However, as a decentralized and adaptive force, the Taliban capitalized on their understanding of the socio-political context in Afghanistan (Jones, 2010). The U.S.'s over-reliance on military force and failure to address the underlying political and socio-economic challenges in the region only served to reinforce the Taliban's insurgency, which grew stronger over time (Rubin, 2013).

### **3. International and Regional Actors: A Broader Multi-Level Prisoner's Dilemma**

The conflict in Afghanistan involved not only U.S. and NATO forces but also numerous regional actors, including Pakistan, Iran, and Russia all of whom had competing interests. For instance, Pakistan's role in supporting the Taliban as a hedge against Indian influence in Afghanistan illustrates a situation where regional actors defected from the collective goal of stabilizing the country (Rashid, 2008). Pakistan's dual role being an ally in the U.S.-led war on terror while also providing sanctuary and support to the Taliban exemplifies the strategic miscalculations often associated with the Prisoner's Dilemma. Although Pakistan could have contributed to the stability of Afghanistan, its pursuit of national interests in the form of strategic depth led to outcomes that destabilized the region and undermined U.S. and NATO objectives (Rubin, 2013).

### **4. The Long-term Impact of Defection and Mistrust**

The prolonged military intervention in Afghanistan further exacerbated the problem of mistrust and defection between coalition members and regional actors. The lack of a unified approach one that combined military, political, and socio-economic strategies led to a vicious cycle of defection. Each actor's short-term tactical decisions ultimately led to the strategic

failure of the mission. The U.S.’s inability to foster long-term cooperation, both with its NATO allies and regional actors, resulted in fragmented policies and a lack of focus on the broader socio-political issues affecting Afghanistan (Gordon, 2010).

The level of cooperation or defection between Taliban and the US. can be illustrated the following graphic form.

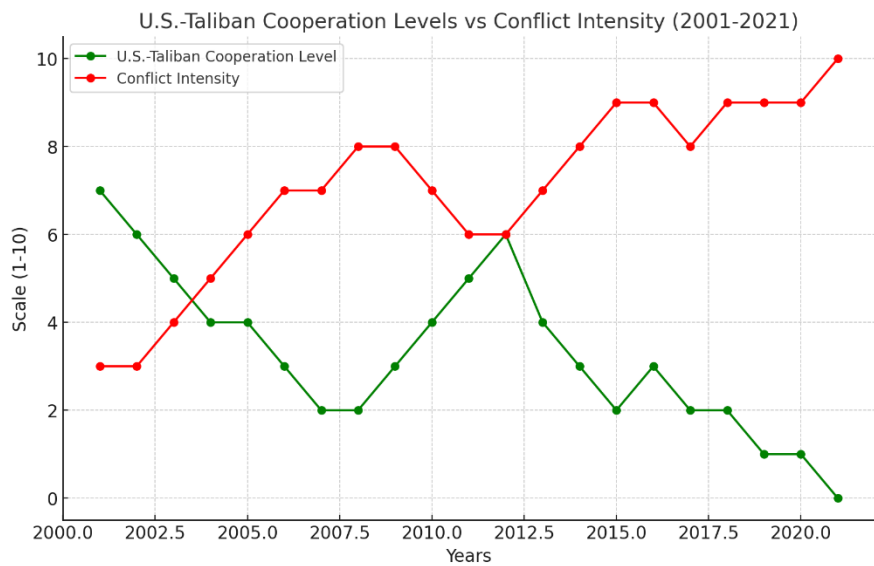


Figure 1. U.S.-Taliban Cooperation Level vs Conflict Intensity (2001-2021)1.

**Causes of the U.S. Failure in Afghanistan:**

The conflict resolution process in Afghanistan was highly complex, involving numerous actors such as the U.S., the Taliban, the Afghan government, as well as various local, regional, and extra-regional stakeholders. The involvement of

1 Adapted from multiple sources (see References) and includes the author's own analysis. This table also incorporates data from the author's previously published preprint: *Iqbal, S. (2024). ScholarOne-Gaming the Afghan War: A Strategic Analysis. Authorea Preprints.*  
<https://doi.org/10.31124/advance.171267205.57401723/v1>

these multiple parties made the situation even more challenging. By late 2010, ISIS began to emerge as a potential destabilizing force in Afghanistan, adding to the already significant threats posed by the Taliban and Al Qaeda. As an international terrorist organization, ISIS posed a risk not only to Afghanistan but also to its surrounding regions. Al Qaeda, with its long-standing alliance with the Taliban, continued to be a major threat in both Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan. Meanwhile, local warlords within Afghanistan, though less powerful than the Taliban, contributed to destabilization, complicating efforts to establish peace through power-sharing agreements. Over time, Afghan civil society also became an increasingly vocal force, speaking out against human rights violations and poor governance from all parties involved in the conflict (Howell & Lind, 2009).

John Galtung, a leading expert in peace and conflict studies, provided insightful analysis on the situation. In an interview, he remarked: *"The Taliban are part of Afghanistan. Talib means seeker-student. They are seeking for the truth in the Koran. And they are dead against secularization. Among the Taliban, you find moderates and less moderates. Afghanistan can't be run by Kabul. It consists of at least twelve nations that are very autonomous. Afghanistan is surrounded by countries that are quite interesting in the sense that parts of those countries are in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan-Tajikistan. So why not make a community like the European Community. Make a Central Asian Community. Much of the restlessness and violence in Afghanistan comes from the relationship with neighboring countries"* (Galtung, 2012). Galtung further suggested that *"the Afghans, with the help of the international community, have to find a Koranic solution like Turkey, the Philippines, and Indonesia. This cannot be imposed by the West. It is a violent country. It needs a security mechanism, but that cannot be NATO. NATO is*

*a Western construct. The UN Security Council should work together with the Organisation for the Islamic Conference on non-aggressive peacekeeping" (Galtung, 2012).*

Although the U.S. initially experienced military success against both Al Qaeda and the Taliban, these victories led to unrealistic expectations. The Taliban soon launched a resurgence, initiating guerrilla attacks against U.S. forces and Afghan government officials, which triggered a new civil conflict. The main actors in this renewed war were the Taliban, the government of President Hamid Karzai, and international forces led by the U.S. Despite this, the majority of Afghans remained largely passive, adopting a "wait and see" approach. The Pashtun population, in particular, displayed greater support for the Taliban, providing them with logistical assistance. Ethnic divisions, especially between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns, further fractured the Afghan political elite over issues of power-sharing. As corruption and governance failures became increasingly apparent, ordinary Afghans began to sympathize with the Taliban, facilitating the insurgents' regrouping by the end of 2002 (Panda, 2014).

### **Optimistic view of Operational Success and subsequent Expansion of Mission for Zero-Sum Outcome:**

Both the U.S. and the Afghan government officially maintained an optimistic perspective on developments in Afghanistan, emphasizing improvements in security, politics, and socio-economic conditions. On June 15, 2004, Afghan President Hamid Karzai addressed the U.S. Congress, praising the military success in combating terrorism in Afghanistan. U.S. officials similarly lauded their military efforts against the Taliban. However, this optimism often conflicted with the complex realities on the ground. The U.S. and its allies aimed to expand their influence by initiating state-building projects throughout Afghanistan. Although France showed reluctance to extend its involvement,

the U.S. continued to press forward, increasing troop deployments across various provinces to train and strengthen local Afghan forces.

In the spring of 2003, after the conclusion of major military operations in Iraq, the U.S. reassured the Afghan government of its long-term commitment. General Tommy Franks, Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad made frequent visits to Kabul to reiterate these assurances. Rumsfeld publicly stated that although military objectives had been met, the focus would shift toward transitioning Afghanistan from post-conflict recovery to stabilization and reconstruction. In support of these efforts, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) began to expand its operations in the fall of 2002, particularly after the command transferred from Turkey to a joint leadership between the Netherlands and Germany (Bush, 2008).

Under new leadership, security zones across Afghan provinces were fortified to reduce the risk of casualties among international forces. Another significant development occurred in September 2003, when Germany, the Netherlands, and NATO headquarters in Brussels signed an agreement to deploy mobile units as part of NATO's strategy in Afghanistan (Suhrke, 2008). This agreement further solidified the role of international forces within Afghanistan's evolving military-political landscape. Additionally, the Tripartite Agreements paved the way for the complete transfer of ISAF leadership to NATO, concluding the mandate of the German-Dutch Joint Command by the fall of 2003 (Alizada, 2014).

## **Establishment of Government and Reliance on Weak Administration at Kabul:**

Immediately after the fall of the Taliban regime, the U.S. established a provisional democratic political system in Afghanistan, with Hamid Karzai as the leader. Governing from Kabul was a challenging task for the Karzai administration, but the U.S. fully supported the new government. However, this support came with significant limitations, as the U.S. refrained from granting Karzai's administration autonomy in key decision-making processes. Instead, the U.S. used the Afghan government primarily as a tool to lobby for legal backing, particularly concerning the expansion and extended mandate of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. This meant that the Afghan government routinely signed any bill that facilitated the U.S. mission in the country, effectively acting as a facilitator for American forces (Bumiller & Kopicki, 2012).

Despite Karzai's repeated concerns about the legitimacy and authority of his cabinet, the U.S., Britain, and Germany only granted his government ceremonial power. The Afghan government and other political opposition groups had limited input in the formation of policies for Afghanistan, which often resulted in shallow strategies that did not address the complex realities on the ground (Katz, 2014). Traditionally, Afghans have a dispute resolution mechanism known as the Jirga, which could have been a more culturally appropriate and effective means of avoiding violence and managing conflict. However, the U.S. excluded the Taliban from the Loya Jirga assemblies held in 2001 and 2002. This exclusionary approach led to a direct military confrontation with the Taliban, further entangling ISAF in the ongoing civil war.

The U.S.'s decision to overlook the policy recommendations from the Afghan government created significant ambiguities in its

approach to conflict resolution in Afghanistan. This, in turn, exacerbated the country's instability. The root of these issues can be traced back to the weak position of the Afghan government, which acted more as a facilitator for U.S. interests rather than an independent body capable of guiding the nation's future.

### **Expanding Afghan Security Forces without Capacity Building Measures:**

In line with the U.S. strategy to transfer security responsibilities to Afghan forces, hundreds of local Afghans were swiftly recruited, trained, and deployed. The U.S. spearheaded this entire process, focusing on establishing the Afghan National Army (ANA) and building a supportive organizational and financial structure (Cordesman, 2009). This effort involved dividing responsibilities among the U.S., UK, Germany, and France. The increasing frequency of attacks on international forces pushed the U.S. to expedite the development of local Afghan security forces, often at the expense of long-term capacity-building initiatives (Long, 2013).

Under the Freedom in Afghanistan Support Act, Washington allocated approximately \$3 billion by the end of 2002 for the creation of Afghan armed forces and law enforcement agencies, covering the period from 2003 to 2006 (Belasco, 2009). However, the process quickly encountered several issues, the most significant of which was mass desertion among recruits, with many taking their weapons with them (Ward, 2003). A number of Afghans joined the recruitment process primarily for financial gain, showing little intent to serve permanently in the regular forces. This issue stemmed partly from the absence of a strong tradition of a regular standing army in Afghan culture (Long, Pezard, Loidolt & Helmus, 2012).

Recruiting Afghan soldiers from the predominantly Pashtun regions proved especially challenging due to a deep-seated trust deficit between NATO, the Afghan government, and Sunni Pashtuns. This led to widespread suspicion and difficulty in ensuring loyalty among Pashtun recruits. Parallel to the recruitment drive, a Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program was launched to integrate former Mujahedeen and Taliban fighters into the national army and police. However, the response was underwhelming, with many pro-Taliban elements joining the ranks only to steal weapons and return to insurgent groups. Several confrontations even occurred between U.S. forces and Afghan security personnel, undermining trust and collaboration (Cordesman, 2009).

These challenges culminated in the U.S. command suspending all combat training programs for new Afghan army recruits in September 2012, pending thorough investigations into their potential links with the Taliban. Despite these setbacks, by the end of 2002, three battalions had been trained, and two more brigades were prepared by March 2003. The main combat unit, the Central Army Corps - 1, was reestablished by the end of August 2003 (Taylor, 2011). Nonetheless, the Afghan security forces remained largely ineffective in resisting the Taliban's growing offensives, forcing continued reliance on international troops (Cordesman, 2009).

NATO's initial plans to shift security responsibilities to Afghan forces after rapid recruitment and training fell short due to the intensifying guerrilla warfare tactics employed by the Taliban. Although the U.S. initially envisioned a smaller contingent of local Afghan forces, by the end of 2012, the number of Afghan security personnel had swelled to around 170,000. Afghan police forces were also expanded through additional recruitment. However, this rapid growth was not accompanied by sufficient

resources, as Afghan forces remained poorly equipped with outdated weapons and lacked modern military technology.

As the Taliban gained clear tactical and operational advantages, the number of U.S. and international forces had to be significantly increased, from 36,000 in 2006 to 22,000 in 2012, with most of the additional forces being U.S. troops, nearly 90,000 in total. Despite the expansion of ANA, Afghan police, and NATO troops, severe shortages of artillery, ammunition, armored vehicles, and spare parts persisted. Initially, the U.S. sought to avoid repeating the Soviet-style mass provision of weapons to Afghan forces but eventually reconsidered, opting to provide U.S.-made arms to Afghan security personnel to bolster their effectiveness.

### **Failure to Understand or Ignore Local Afghan Cultural Conditions:**

Another important aspect is the impact of Afghan culture on the failure of U.S. strategies in Afghanistan. One of Afghans' traditional weapons is patience, a characteristic the U.S. and its allies failed to fully grasp. The U.S. prematurely embarked on a state-building program, mistakenly assuming that the Taliban threat was being eliminated. Empirical data supports this notion, as the Taliban's resurgence was facilitated by various factors. According to UNAMA (2021), civilian casualties increased by 47% in the first half of 2021 compared to the same period in 2020, with anti-government elements responsible for 64% of casualties, demonstrating the Taliban's persistent influence despite U.S. counterinsurgency efforts. The absence of good governance, widespread corruption, and human rights violations by both local and U.S. forces allowed the Taliban to gain sympathy from the local population. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index ranked Afghanistan among the most corrupt countries in the world, which weakened the Afghan

government's legitimacy. Local Afghan culture places immense importance on honor and respect, particularly towards foreigners. The U.S. military's involvement in incidents of civilian harm, such as the 2010 Uruzgan airstrike that killed 23 civilians, significantly eroded local support. According to a 2019 poll by the Asia Foundation, 85% of Afghans were concerned about corruption, and nearly half reported that the government's inability to provide security was one of the country's most pressing issues. This disenfranchisement empowered the Taliban, who exploited these cultural sensitivities and grievances, bolstering their recruitment efforts (Giustozzi, 2009).

Poverty, especially in rural Afghanistan, compounded the U.S. strategy's failure. Afghanistan's rural areas, home to approximately 75% of the population, experienced extreme deprivation even after years of U.S. intervention. World Bank data shows that as of 2020, 55% of Afghans lived below the poverty line, with rural regions hit hardest. The U.S. occupation did little to address this issue, which fueled resentment and provided the Taliban with a fertile recruitment base. Afghans have learned to endure with minimal resources, while simultaneously understanding how to benefit from external interventions, due to their history of surviving conflict and deprivation. For some, the U.S. war in Afghanistan was seen as a "blessing in disguise," allowing them to leverage foreign aid or manipulate alliances for their own survival, a pattern consistent with Afghanistan's history of elite capture during periods of foreign occupation.

Another significant misstep in the U.S. policy was the U.S.'s early reliance on Northern Alliance warlords, who engaged in ethnic cleansing and power grabs, diverting attention away from U.S. objectives in Afghanistan (Kuchins, 2010). A 2013 Human Rights Watch report confirmed that warlords in post-Taliban

Afghanistan engaged in widespread abuses, including torture and extrajudicial killings, which alienated significant portions of the population. By failing to hold these warlords accountable, the U.S. inadvertently empowered ethnic factions over national unity, further complicating governance efforts (Howell & Lind, 2009).

The U.S. policymakers made the critical mistake of focusing on a few large cities and urban elites, assuming that they represented the broader Afghan culture. However, the rural areas, which are predominantly conservative, tribal, and largely self-governed, were neglected. According to a 2018 International Republican Institute survey, 83% of rural Afghans felt disconnected from national decision-making processes, reflecting a deep cultural divide. The tribal alliances, often based on ethnic, historical, or religious ties, played a crucial role in Afghan society. These alliances were manipulated by insurgent groups, allowing them to establish strongholds in rural regions, a pattern the U.S. failed to counter effectively (Jamal & Maley, 2023).

The U.S. strategies of pitting tribes and sects against each other was short-sighted, a sentiment reinforced by empirical data. Studies by the RAND Corporation revealed that divide-and-rule tactics in Afghanistan often backfired, creating long-term instability rather than securing loyalty. This approach further fractured an already divided society, leading to increased resistance against both the Afghan government and U.S. forces (Jamal & Maley, 2023).

Tahir Khan and Imtiaz Gul, two other prominent analysts, also shared similar views, pointing out that the U.S. misunderstood Afghan culture and rural dynamics, which contributed to the failure of their strategies. In particular, they highlighted the U.S.'s focus on short-term military gains over long-term nation-building efforts, which led to resentment and resistance among local Afghans. This disconnect, coupled with the failure to address the

deep-rooted socio-economic and cultural complexities of Afghan society, ultimately undermined the U.S.'s mission in the country (Khan & Gull, Gul, 2020).

### **Failure of the Statebuilding Program:**

After the initial military success against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the U.S. initiated a statebuilding program based on the Weberian democratic model, with the primary objective of excluding the Taliban from any power-sharing arrangement and establishing a long-term pro-U.S. political system. However, the U.S. statebuilding effort largely failed due to several reasons. First, there was an insufficient understanding of Afghanistan's local traditions, or a deliberate disregard for them, as they were seen as irrelevant. Secondly, there was a significant underestimation of the connection between the capacity of institutions and their legitimacy in the country. Thirdly, the donor states failed to ensure transparency in the utilization of funds allocated for various projects related to statebuilding (Afsah & Guhr, 2005).

The U.S. struggled to grasp the traditions and socio-political culture of Afghanistan. American policy advisors believed they knew what the country needed for statebuilding, but their perception differed from what the Afghan people actually wanted. U.S. policy toward Afghanistan was often driven by fantasy, notably the belief that the Taliban could be destroyed and that Afghanistan's culture could be transformed and replaced with a Western democratic model through statebuilding efforts (Edwards, 2010). The U.S.-backed Afghan government's failure was not solely due to the Taliban but was also the result of the blind spots and prejudices in U.S. policy. For instance, the U.S. favored a strong centralized authority, endorsing a constitution that granted extensive powers to the president, while neglecting the traditional authority of tribal warlords. This, coupled with a

perplexing electoral system, weakened the development of parliament and political parties (Rubin & Hamidzada, 2007).

The U.S. statebuilding efforts also provoked outrage by attempting to reshape gender norms in a way that contradicted Afghan culture. Afghan traditions, which were integral to the country's political system, were treated by the U.S. as obstacles to be easily overcome, a view that proved incorrect. This arrogance turned a large segment of the Afghan population against the government, seeing it as a mere puppet of the U.S. Consequently, many Afghans turned to informal community-based dispute resolution mechanisms and local leaders they trusted, leaving space for the Taliban to gradually return to urban areas from their rural strongholds (McGougan, 2012).

On October 3, 2001, Lakhdar Brahimi was appointed as the UN Special Representative for Afghanistan, overseeing political and humanitarian efforts following the Taliban's ousting. His approach emphasized the involvement of the six-plus-two group, notably Pakistan and Iran, in shaping Afghanistan's political future. Brahimi's report to the UN Security Council stressed several key points: establishing a legitimate Afghan government capable of countering terrorism, recognizing Pakistan and Iran's roles and interests, maintaining Afghanistan's unity, achieving Afghan consensus with minimal external interference, aligning regional interests with stability, and creating a broadly representative government with both international and domestic legitimacy (Kronstad & Katzman, 2008). Brahimi also highlighted the UN's crucial role in facilitating negotiations and securing long-term international support. Despite these recommendations, Brahimi later revealed that key stakeholders, including the U.S., India, and Russia, were adamant about excluding the Taliban from political processes. Although he attempted to engage with Mullah Omar, this effort was thwarted

by U.S. resistance. Brahimi noted that a negotiation proposal from Mullah Omar was discussed with Hamid Karzai and U.S. officials but ultimately ignored (Brahimi, 2022). These revelations underline how the exclusion of the Taliban from the initial political process contributed to ongoing conflict and strategic failures in U.S. policy (Suhrke, 2013).

### **President Bush's Penchant for Unilateral Action:**

The US intervention in Afghanistan was marked by skepticism towards local, regional, and extra-regional players, and a failure to overcome the prisoner's dilemma. The Bush administration's unilateral approach and reluctance to accept international cooperation limited the effectiveness of the global war on terror. The US sought to harness international support while maintaining freedom of action, but its approach created tensions with allies and regional players (Rubin, & Armstrong, 2003) & (Ashraf, 2011).

The US successfully obtained UN resolutions and NATO support but was reluctant to accept military assistance from allies. Russia's influence in Central Asia and its support for the Northern Alliance were seen as a challenge to US interests. The US and Russia cooperated on anti-drugs efforts but had differing views on Afghanistan's future (Blanchard, 2009).

The US was cautious about relying on regional countries and maintained its lead role in Afghanistan, but the growing challenges and costs of the war led to increased cooperation with regional players. The relationship between the US and Russia was marked by mistrust, with the US seeking to limit Russian influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia (Foxall, 2014). Despite common interests, the two sides had differing goals and approaches, leading to an "unhappy marriage" in their cooperation (Buddenberg & Byrd, 2006).

## **Strategic Confusion in U.S. Policy Regarding Talks with the Taliban for Conflict Resolution:**

The U.S. erred significantly by excluding the Taliban from the Bonn process, which was designed to establish a democratic political framework in Afghanistan. The Taliban, primarily composed of Pashtuns, hold significant political sway that could not be ignored. Hamid Karzai has disclosed that senior Taliban leaders sought to negotiate a peace deal as early as December 2001. In a response to a Voice of America query about a letter from Mullah Omar, Karzai clarified, "The letter was not from Mullah Omar but from the Taliban government's council of ministers. I was in a village north of Kandahar, wounded by an American bomb, when a Taliban delegation presented this letter. It acknowledged the new interim government and indicated a willingness to transfer power." Despite their readiness to cease hostilities and recognize Karzai's government contingent on a power-sharing arrangement, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld dismissed the proposal, insisting on a military victory over the Taliban. From 2002 to 2004, Taliban leaders repeatedly sought a political resolution, but their overtures went unheeded as the U.S. pursued the establishment of a democratic government in Afghanistan, excluding Taliban leadership (Mir & Sharifi, 2020).

Under President Obama, the U.S. continued to favor a military approach while also initiating peace talks with the Taliban. However, these talks stalled as Obama announced a troop drawdown by December 2014, which the Taliban interpreted as a victory, leading them to harden their stance and eventually withdraw from negotiations (Fair, 2010). This move intensified the conflict between U.S. forces and the Taliban.

Ihsan Ghani, former head of NACTA in Pakistan, criticized the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, describing it as a series of missteps

with no coherent plan. He likened U.S. actions to being “absentee landlords” who abandoned Afghanistan to warlords and paratroopers while simultaneously intervening in Iraq, Libya, and Syria. The U.S. lacked experience in managing complex, diverse societies like Afghanistan’s and criticized the U.S. for failing to train Afghan governments in effective governance. After President Trump’s election, there was an intense debate within the U.S. about whether to escalate against the Taliban and press Pakistan, a policy change that appeared to occur abruptly within 72 hours (Kamal, 2021). This quick shift in strategy reflected a broader confusion at the highest levels of U.S. policy-making regarding Afghanistan.

### **Taliban Resilience:**

After being excluded from power sharing negotiations and conflict resolution efforts, the Taliban began regrouping in 2001 following their initial ouster. Despite setbacks, losses and internal divisions, the movement steadily expanded its strength, regained control over many rural areas and became increasingly resistant to a negotiated settlement. In July 2015, the death of Taliban founder Mullah Omar was publicly confirmed after being concealed for years to preserve internal cohesion. His death triggered leadership disputes as Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour assumed leadership without unanimous support, particularly from Mullah Omar's family. While some members accepted his leadership to avoid further fragmentation, others defected, including Mullah Muhammad Rasul Akhund who established the Supreme Council of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Mansour combined military pressure with limited openness to negotiations before being killed in a U.S. drone strike in May 2016 (Karimi, 2016).

Following Mansour's death, Mullah Haybatullah Akhundzada was appointed Amir and succeeded in reunifying several splinter

groups. Although initially expected to prioritize military consolidation, he also demonstrated willingness to engage in peace efforts through the Moscow Peace Conference, Islamabad meetings and the Doha peace talks. According to an anonymous Taliban leader, repeated attempts to initiate direct talks with the United States were rejected in favor of military options while the Afghan government remained reluctant to negotiate under U.S. influence. Alongside these political developments, Afghanistan's geography and the Taliban's effective use of guerrilla warfare significantly strengthened the insurgency (Barno, 2007).

Afghanistan's mountainous terrain, limited cultivable land and porous border with Pakistan created favorable conditions for guerrilla warfare while making governance and military operations extremely difficult. These geographic constraints enabled the Taliban to operate in small mobile units and maintain influence in remote areas where international forces faced serious operational challenges (Department of Defense, 2019).

The resurgence of Taliban violence, alongside the emergence of ISIS, was reinforced by weak coordination among coalition partners and widespread corruption within the Afghan government. International forces increasingly shifted combat responsibilities to Afghan security forces while limiting air support to reduce civilian casualties. President Obama's announcement of troop withdrawals without a political settlement further encouraged Taliban expectations of eventual victory (Svendsen, 2016; Fair, 2010).

Under Donald Trump, the United States adopted a more forceful military approach despite its long term objective of withdrawing troops. In August 2017, Trump argued that strategy would be guided by battlefield conditions and urged coalition partners to assume greater responsibility. New engagement rules expanded combat operations and resulted in a substantial increase in

airstrikes while the Afghan government came under greater pressure to address corruption within its security institutions (Zannella, 2020; Mehta, 2017; Ward, 2003). At the same time, Washington intensified pressure on Pakistan to contribute more to Afghan stability. Pakistan rejected these demands and argued that the repeated calls to "do more" lacked empirical evidence (Katzman & Thomas, 2017).

After two decades of insurgency, the Taliban swept back into power in August 2021 as U.S. forces withdrew under a 2020 peace agreement. The collapse of the U.S.-backed Afghan government was rapid; Kabul fell on August 15, 2021, and Taliban leaders quickly reestablished the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA). Under their return, the Taliban imposed a strict theocratic order like their 1990s regime, despite prior promises to respect rights. The new regime consolidated control over nearly all territory; scattered resistance (e.g. in Panjshir) was quickly crushed. No other Afghan actor challenged their rule, and IEA officials filled ministries and posts (SIGAR, 2022).

Taliban rule has severely restricted personal freedoms, especially for women and minorities. According to U.S. and UN sources, the Taliban have imposed strict Islamic laws reminiscent of the 1990s. Girls have been banned from secondary school and women from most universities; women's work outside the home is largely forbidden. These measures are formalized by Taliban edicts, with no reversal of restrictions on female education or employment. The Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice was revived, and public punishments (floggings, executions) have resumed. Women's rights advocates call the situation "gender apartheid". Nearly 80% of female journalists have been forced out of jobs, and activists say the rates of child marriage and domestic violence have risen (UNAMA, 2023).

Other civil liberties are also crushed. Media outlets must follow Taliban political guidelines, and independent news is banned. Journalists, dissidents, and ethnic minorities (especially Hazaras, Shia Muslims, and other groups) face intimidation or worse. State security forces patrol cities under “moral policing” rules (women must cover their faces and be accompanied by a male relative). Peaceful protests are violently suppressed, and UN reports document disappearances of activists. Overall, the regime shows little tolerance for dissent or diversity: political opposition is outlawed and any demonstration is rapidly crushed. Even within the Taliban, orders like travel bans on women or public executions have often been slow-walked by field commanders uneasy with the harshest policies (Cox, 2022).

The Taliban now control Afghan security forces and arms left by U.S. troops, so insurgent-style guerrilla fighting has greatly diminished. However, threats remain. The Islamic State – Khorasan Province (IS-K) still operates in remote areas and claimed major attacks (for example on Kabul airport in 2021). Taliban and IS-K fighters clashed in eastern provinces. The National Resistance Front (NRF), led by Ahmad Massoud in Panjshir Valley, declared insurgency but was largely defeated by late 2021. Other minority militias (“Freedom Front”) have surfaced in the north but so far with limited impact. Taliban forces maintain a near-monopoly on violence, but they face challenges: many fighters were poorly trained, there are supply shortages, and the economy cannot fully pay salaries. Still, the Taliban military remains intact and largely unified, giving them firm control despite the occasional IS-K attack or localized uprisings (Cox, 2022).

Afghanistan’s economy has collapsed under Taliban rule. Major donors froze most aid after 2021, and international banking access was cut off. UN and think-tank reports note a 30% drop in

GDP and half a million jobs lost since the takeover. Poverty and hunger have soared: over 90% of Afghans live in poverty or extreme poverty, and more than half the population is now food insecure. Malnutrition rates have spiked, and tens of thousands of children are at risk of famine. The country depends on humanitarian aid from the UN and a few countries (Pakistan, China, Russia, etc.), but that support is far below pre-2021 levels. Experts warn of a “humanitarian catastrophe” if aid declines further. Despite these hardships, the Taliban spend heavily on security and ideological programs; many Afghans must rely on subsistence farming or cross-border trade. In short, basic services are neglected and living standards have returned to war-time levels (UNAMA, 2023).

Afghanistan’s neighbors hold complicated ties with the Taliban. Pakistan is a close ally of some Taliban leaders, but relations soured by 2025–26. Pakistani officials have accused the Taliban of harboring the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) insurgents. In late 2025 border clashes erupted: the Taliban reportedly shelled Pakistani border posts, and Pakistan conducted airstrikes on Afghan territory. By early 2026, Pakistan even declared “open war” on the Afghan Taliban, marking a serious breakdown in ties. Other neighbors (Iran, Central Asian states) and powers (Russia, China) are engaging cautiously; some have reopened trade and aid channels, but all are wary of instability. The UN and major donors demand improvement on human rights as a condition for aid (Cox, 2022).

### **Withdrawal Announcement and Subsequent Surge in Troops:**

Both Presidents Obama and Trump utilized a bluffing strategy in their Afghan conflict policies to gauge the Taliban’s intentions and gain leverage. Obama’s AfPak strategy created uncertainty about troop withdrawals from Afghanistan. Public opinion in

2012 was strongly against continued U.S. military involvement, with 60% of Americans deeming the war not worth the cost and over half supporting an unconditional withdrawal, regardless of the ongoing conflict or the Afghan army's readiness. Despite this, the U.S. intensified its operations against the Taliban, shifting the burden of frontline combat to Afghan forces while providing support through training, intelligence, and air assistance. Afghan forces, however, were inadequately equipped, leading to significant losses (Cordesman, 2002).

The deteriorating socio-political and security situation led to growing distrust between the Afghan government and U.S. officials. Rising casualties caused psychological strain among both security forces and civilians. Public protests and pressure from Western civil society organizations against the ongoing war intensified, leading to a reduction in support for NATO forces. Obama's announcement of a gradual withdrawal from 2011 to 2014 was made despite a worsening security environment, with the Taliban gaining strength and recruiting more fighters. This strategy appeared to signal a potential victory for the Taliban similar to the Soviet Union's withdrawal in 1989, prompting the Taliban to escalate attacks (Wissing, 2016).

A high-level conference in London in January 2010 endorsed a new policy focusing on a phased withdrawal and shifting security responsibilities. The U.S. aimed to establish long-term counterterrorism agreements with the Afghan government to prevent terrorism. Despite some attempts at dialogue in 2012, no significant progress was achieved due to the Taliban's zero-sum expectations. The U.S. sought to transfer security responsibilities to Afghan forces by 2014, with NATO meetings in Tallinn, Kabul, and Lisbon outlining the transition and emphasizing long-term support for Afghanistan. Countries like the Netherlands and

France began their withdrawals, often ignoring the security risks and leaving Afghan forces inadequately prepared.

As Taliban attacks increased, including a high-profile attack in August 2014 that killed Major General Harold J. Greene, pressure mounted on the U.S. to reconsider its withdrawal plans. The rapid withdrawal of international troops appeared to strengthen the Taliban's position and contribute to their aggressive tactics (Arenas, 2013).

In May 2012, President Obama's strategic agreement with Afghan President Hamid Karzai lacked specifics on post-2014 responsibilities, leading to resistance from Karzai. Other NATO countries like Germany and France had already committed to long-term cooperation, promising support for various aspects of Afghan governance and security. Despite these commitments, the security situation on the ground deteriorated, exposing the flaws in the withdrawal strategy and underscoring the need for continued international involvement.

Trump's administration, reversing the gradual withdrawal approach, announced a new South Asia policy in August 2017. This policy focused on increasing troop levels, relaxing rules of engagement, and pressuring neighboring countries to contribute to Afghanistan's stabilization. The strategy aimed to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table by enhancing military pressure. Despite initial successes in boosting troop numbers and increasing NATO's commitment, the overall policy demonstrated a significant shift back towards a coercive approach.

Under Trump, the Resolute Support Mission (RSM) was expanded, and the U.S. deployed additional troops to support Afghan forces. However, the effectiveness of these measures was limited by ongoing distrust and resistance from both local populations and international allies. The policy's emphasis on

military action over political solutions indicated a tactical shift but failed to address the deep-seated issues facing Afghanistan. The sustainability of this approach remains uncertain, as the U.S. continues to play a crucial role in Afghanistan's stabilization despite its formal withdrawal (Schreer & Waldman, 2019).

**Prisoner’s Dilemma as a whole:**

From the analysis of the above causes of the US. Failure in Afghanistan reflects a Prisoner’s Dilemma in the context that the absence of trust and fear of betrayal led both the U.S. and local actors to defect, making the situation worse for everyone involved, including the eventual fall of the Afghan government.

*Table 1. Instance & Nature of Prisoner's Dilemma between the US and Taliban<sup>2</sup>.*

| Year      | Key Event       | Actor 1 | Actor 2         | Nature of Prisoner's Dilemma              | Outcome                   | Citation                  |
|-----------|-----------------|---------|-----------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 2001-2002 | Bonn Conference | U.S.    | Afghan Warlords | U.S. empowered local warlords to maintain | Weak governance structure | [Barrett R. Rubin (2002)] |

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from publicly available conflict timeline data compiled from multiple sources including the Council on Foreign Relations and U.S. Department of Defense reports.

short-term stability, leading to long-term power imbalances and governance failure.

|      |                             |                  |                |                                                                                                          |                             |                       |
|------|-----------------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| 2004 | Constitution of Afghanistan | U.S.-Backed Govt | Local Leaders  | Centralized constitution alienated key regional powers who defected by supporting insurgency indirectly. | Strengthening of insurgency | [Ahmed Rashid (2008)] |
| 2006 | Rise of Taliban insurgency  | NATO/U.S. Forces | Pakistan (ISI) | While U.S. focused                                                                                       | Taliban resurgence          | [Steve Coll (2018)]   |

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| 9   | Strategy | Militar | an   | troop    | achieved | Wood   |
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|     |          |         |      | aimed at | gains    | (2010) |
|     |          |         |      | quick    |          | ]      |
|     |          |         |      | military |          |        |
|     |          |         |      | victory, |          |        |
|     |          |         |      | while    |          |        |
|     |          |         |      | Afghan   |          |        |
|     |          |         |      | govern   |          |        |
|     |          |         |      | ment     |          |        |
|     |          |         |      | continue |          |        |
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|          |                                        |        |              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                            |                             |
|----------|----------------------------------------|--------|--------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
|          |                                        |        |              | corrupti<br>on and<br>inefficie<br>ncy,<br>failing<br>to take<br>reforms.                                                                                                                                                                |                                            |                             |
| 201<br>1 | Killing<br>of<br>Osama<br>Bin<br>Laden | U.S.   | Pakist<br>an | U.S.<br>raid on<br>Abbotta<br>bad<br>without<br>informin<br>g<br>Pakistan<br>undermi<br>ned<br>bilateral<br>cooperat<br>ion,<br>leading<br>to<br>mistrust<br>and<br>limited<br>cooperat<br>ion in<br>anti-<br>Taliban<br>operatio<br>ns. | Strained<br>U.S.-<br>Pakistan<br>relations | [Bruce<br>Riedel<br>(2011)] |
| 201      | Bilatera                               | Afghan | U.S.         | Afghan                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Lack of                                    | [Thom                       |

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|          |                            |      |             |                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                              |                                         |
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| 4        | l<br>Security<br>Agreement | Govt |             | govern<br>ment<br>delayed<br>signing<br>the<br>agreeme<br>nt, while<br>U.S.<br>prepared<br>withdra<br>wal,<br>leading<br>to<br>uncertai<br>nty and<br>loss of<br>trust. | long-<br>term<br>commitm<br>ent                              | as<br>Barfiel<br>d<br>(2013)<br>]       |
| 202<br>0 | Doha<br>Agreement          | U.S. | Taliba<br>n | The<br>U.S.<br>negotiat<br>ed with<br>the<br>Taliban<br>without<br>involvin<br>g the<br>Afghan<br>govern<br>ment,<br>prioritizi<br>ng troop<br>withdra<br>wal over      | Collapse<br>of<br>Afghan<br>state<br>after<br>withdraw<br>al | [Carter<br>Malkas<br>ian<br>(2021)<br>] |

## Afghan stability.

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The above tabulated data highlights several key instances from 2001 to 2021 where the Prisoner's Dilemma framework explains the strategic failures in Afghanistan. The first is a mutual Defection; in almost every instance, the U.S. and its partners (Afghan government, regional powers like Pakistan, or the Taliban) chose strategies that benefited their short-term interests but harmed long-term cooperation. For example, U.S. reliance on warlords in the early 2000s provided stability but undermined governance, leading to a fragmented political system. Secondly, there was a lack of Trust and Cooperation; the U.S. sought quick military victories, such as the 2009 surge, while the Afghan government remained corrupt and inefficient, failing to implement necessary reforms. Both sides prioritized their immediate goals (military victory, political power) over cooperative governance, which would have required more trust and compromise. Thirdly, it is widely believed that Pakistan's covert support of the Taliban to hedge against India's influence in Afghanistan is another example of defection. Both the U.S. and Pakistan pursued self-serving strategies, resulting in the Taliban's resurgence. Similarly, the 2020 Doha Agreement, which excluded the Afghan government, undermined broader cooperation, leading to a rapid collapse of the state after U.S. withdrawal. Fourthly, the outcomes consistently show that defection by either side led to a resurgence of conflict, loss of stability, and eventually the collapse of U.S. efforts. Cooperation could have brought more long-term success, but was rarely pursued.

The overall US engagement in Afghanistan and Taliban resilience is illustrated in the following graph.

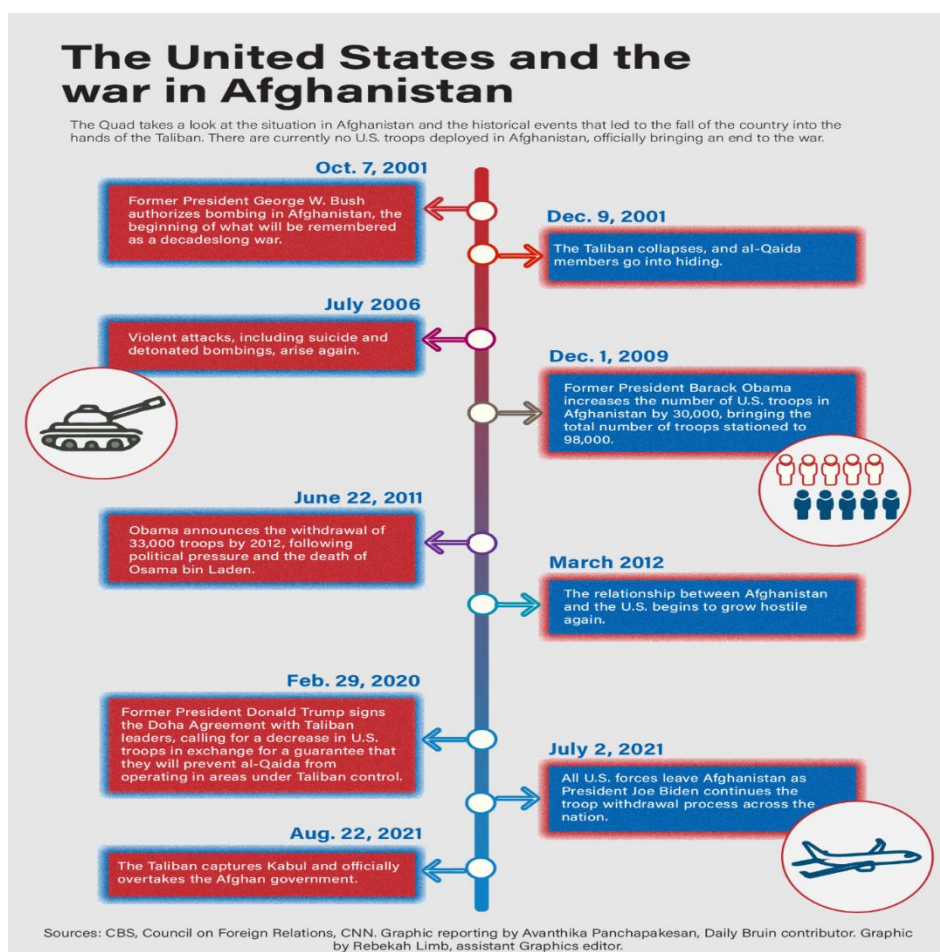


Figure 2. Timeline of the US-Taliban War from 2001 till 2021 (Panchapakesan & Limb, n.d.).

### Conclusion:

This study set out to examine why cooperation repeatedly failed among the major actors involved in Afghanistan despite shared interests in stabilizing the country. By applying the Prisoner's Dilemma framework, the analysis demonstrates that mistrust, strategic misalignment, and competing incentives repeatedly pushed actors toward defection rather than cooperation. The U.S.

initial success in ousting the Taliban regime, achieved within weeks with the support of the Northern Alliance and the Taliban's inability to withstand airstrikes, was overshadowed by subsequent strategic failures. The declaration of victory by U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld on May 1, 2003, marked an overly optimistic view of operational success that led to a misalignment of U.S. strategic priorities. This optimism blinded U.S. decision-makers to the opportunity for negotiating a more favorable agreement on governance and power-sharing in Afghanistan. As a result, the Taliban were able to regroup and resurge.

The U.S. approach in Afghanistan was characterized by unilateral decision-making, neglecting the potential benefits of inclusive dialogue with key Afghan stakeholders. The expansion of the U.S. mission, which led to financial strains and discord among coalition partners, further exacerbated the situation. Skepticism towards local, regional, and extra-regional actors, along with concerns over excessive spending and the potential support for the Taliban from countries like Russia and Pakistan, created an environment of distrust.

Corruption and ineffective governance within the Afghan government undermined public trust and contributed to the failure of U.S. strategies. The inability to address Afghanistan's local political culture and socio-economic realities led to the imposition of an unsustainable centralized democratic system, which did not adequately represent the country's diverse ethnic groups. The increasing corruption in state-building programs and military confrontations, combined with collateral damage, eroded public support and pushed many towards the Taliban. Additionally, the Taliban capitalized on their safe havens within Afghanistan's challenging terrain and received logistical support from sympathetic segments of the civilian population. The

strategic confusion in U.S. policy, characterized by an over-reliance on military force and failure to effectively engage with the Taliban politically, highlighted a fundamental misalignment with Afghanistan's socio-economic and political context. This misalignment was a critical factor in the overall failure of U.S. strategies in Afghanistan.

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