From Counterterrorism to Nation-Building: The United States in Afghanistan, 2001–2021

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1310000035

Received: 14 October 2026; Accepted: 20 October 2026; Published: 29 October 2026

ABSTRACT

This article examines why the Taliban returned to Kabul in 2021, twenty years after the United States removed them from power in a matter of weeks. It argues that the collapse of the Afghan Republic cannot be understood separately from the way the Taliban regime was overthrown in 2001. The decision to invade followed the 9/11 attacks and the Taliban's refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden, although Cold War proxy politics, regional rivalries, and the neglect after 1989 had already set the stage. Washington justified the use of force as self-defence. The campaign won a swift military victory through air power, special forces, and Afghan partners, but it did not produce an inclusive political settlement. Two decades of foreign aid, reliance on strongmen, and a divided government could not fill that gap, while the Taliban regrouped in sanctuary in Pakistan. Using a "victory–vacuum–dependence" model, the article shows that the Doha Agreement and the 2021 withdrawal exposed this weakness and did not independently cause the collapse. Military success does not automatically become political success.

Keywords: Afghanistan; United States foreign policy; Taliban; Operation Enduring Freedom; War on Terror; withdrawal; state-building; victory–vacuum–dependence

INTRODUCTION

Debates on military intervention rarely produce agreement on what success means. For some, success means removing a threat. For others, it means creating a stable political order that outlasts the intervening army. The war in Afghanistan shows why this distinction matters. On 7 October 2001, less than a month after the 9/11 attacks, the United States and its allies launched Operation Enduring Freedom against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. In August 2021, the last American troops left Afghanistan, and the Taliban returned to power. It is commonly described as the longest war in American history (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], 2021).

The war began as a narrow counterterrorism mission, expanded into an ambitious state-building effort, and ended with the Taliban back in power. The invasion was not an isolated decision. Its roots extend through the Cold War and the rise of transnational terrorist groups in the 1990s. The tension between military victory and political order shaped every stage of the war.

This article argues that the collapse of the Afghan Republic in 2021 cannot be understood separately from the way the Taliban regime was overthrown in 2001.[1] The American-led campaign won a rapid military victory through air power, special operations forces, and Afghan armed partners, but it did not produce an inclusive political settlement or institutions able to exercise authority on their own. The state-building that followed relied heavily on foreign finance, military support, contractors, and patronage networks, while the

[1] In this article, "the Taliban government" refers to the regime that ruled most of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. "The Afghan Republic" refers to the political order created by the Bonn Agreement of 2001 and the constitution of 2004, which lasted until August 2021.

Taliban benefited from cross-border sanctuary and adapted as an insurgent organisation. The withdrawal of external support in 2020–2021 therefore did not, by itself, cause the collapse of the state. It exposed dependencies that had built up over the previous two decades.

Understanding this tension is essential for assessing what the United States achieved in Afghanistan and what it failed to achieve. The history of Afghanistan before 2001 is therefore the logical starting point.

1.1 The Historical Background of Afghanistan

Afghanistan sits at the crossroads of Central, South, and Southwest Asia. This position made it a trade corridor but also a frontier over which outside powers repeatedly competed. Barfield (2010) traces the modern Afghan state to 1747, when Ahmad Shah Durrani founded the Durrani Empire around Kandahar. He describes a society where Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and others lived side by side. Power was typically shared and contested among tribal, regional, and religious elites rather than concentrated in a strong central government (Barfield, 2010).

During the nineteenth century, Afghanistan was caught between the British and Russian empires in a rivalry known as the "Great Game." Barfield (2010) shows that Britain fought three wars against Afghan rulers, in 1839–42, 1878–80, and 1919. The Durand Line agreement of 1893 fixed a frontier that divided Pashtun communities. Afghan governments have never fully accepted it, and the border remains a source of friction with Pakistan (Barfield, 2010).[2] Afghanistan gained full control over its foreign policy in 1919. Zahir Shah reigned as king from 1933 until a coup in 1973 established a republic. In April 1978, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan seized power and installed a communist government.

The new government pushed through rapid reforms and met resistance with severe repression, which provoked a widespread rebellion. The Soviet Union intervened militarily in December 1979 to defend its ally. Coll (2004) explains that the mujahideen, the Afghan resistance fighters, received money, weapons, and training from the United States, Saudi Arabia, China, the United Kingdom, and others. Much of this assistance was channelled through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) (Coll, 2004). By many estimates, the war killed at least one million Afghans and forced several million more into exile. Foreign volunteers also joined the fight. Bergen (2006) shows how one of them, Osama bin Laden, built the networks that later became al-Qaeda. These groups were related but distinct: the Afghan mujahideen factions, the Arab volunteers, al-Qaeda, and the later Taliban should not be treated as a single movement.

The Soviet Union withdrew in February 1989, and the communist government in Kabul collapsed in 1992. The victorious mujahideen factions then turned against one another, and civil war devastated the capital. Rashid (2000) describes how the Taliban, a movement of religious students led by Mullah Mohammad Omar, emerged around Kandahar in 1994. With support from Pakistan, they captured Kabul in September 1996 and proclaimed the "Islamic Emirate." Their rule was severe: they enforced a strict interpretation of Islamic law, banned girls' education and women's public work, and persecuted minorities such as the Hazaras (Rashid, 2000). Only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates recognised the regime. In the north, the Northern Alliance continued to resist under commanders such as Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was assassinated on 9 September 2001, two days before the attacks on the United States.

The Taliban also sheltered bin Laden and al-Qaeda, who used Afghan territory for training and planning. Al-Qaeda bombed the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and attacked the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000.

The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (2004), usually called the 9/11 Commission, found that the threat was evident, yet American responses during the late 1990s, namely cruise-missile strikes and unsuccessful diplomacy, failed to eliminate it. The attacks of 11 September 2001 therefore transformed a long-developing danger into an immediate cause for war.

[2] Pakistan, as the successor to British India, treats the Durand Line as the international boundary. Successive Afghan governments have not formally accepted it, which is why the border remains disputed.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

The core issue this article examines is a paradox. The 2001 invasion initially appeared to succeed, but the broader goals that followed ended in failure. The Taliban were removed from power within weeks at relatively low cost to the United States; yet after twenty years and enormous financial expenditure, the same group retook control with little organised resistance. How did this happen? Answering this requires looking at why the United States chose to invade in the first place and how American strategy, combined with Afghan decisions, influenced the course of the war. Understanding this paradox has direct implications for how far military force can achieve political ends in modern international relations.

To examine this paradox, the article is guided by two research questions:

- What historical, geopolitical, and legal factors prompted the United States to invade Afghanistan in 2001, and how did it legally justify its use of force?

- How did American and Afghan strategies and responses shape the conflict from the invasion through the 2021 withdrawal, and what do the outcomes reveal about the limits of military intervention?

The article has three aims. First, it outlines the historical and strategic context that enabled the invasion. Second, it investigates why the United States intervened, how the military campaign unfolded, and how the use of force was legally justified. Third, it evaluates the challenges that emerged afterwards, the Afghan reaction, the withdrawal process, and its aftermath, in order to draw lessons for international security policy.

2.1 Scope of the Study

The study covers the American intervention in Afghanistan, beginning with the Soviet invasion of 1979 as background context, moving through the October 2001 invasion, and continuing to the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. Developments after August 2021 are discussed only briefly, in Section 6.5. The study draws on secondary academic sources, official reports, legal documents, and the Doha Agreement to analyse how the war evolved. Interviews and the internal records of the Afghan government fall outside its scope.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the war in Afghanistan has grown steadily since 2001 and draws from several fields, such as history, security studies, international law, and state-building. For this article, the literature is grouped into five thematic areas. The scholars within each area do not always agree, and the main disagreements are noted below.

3.1 The Cold War Legacy and Blowback

Research into the Cold War period shows that support from the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan for the mujahideen in the 1980s helped build armed networks and a militant culture that lingered long after the Soviet conflict (Coll, 2004; Rashid, 2000). Johnson (2000) popularised the term "blowback" to describe the unintended consequences of covert action that eventually harm the state that carried it out.[3] Applied to Afghanistan, this concept suggests that the events of 2001 cannot be fully understood without looking at decisions taken two decades earlier (Johnson, 2000).

However, blowback is better treated as an interpretive framework than as an uncontested causal fact. The groups involved were related but distinct. Bergen (2006) shows that al-Qaeda grew out of the networks of Arab volunteers around bin Laden, while Rashid (2000) shows that the Taliban emerged later, from the religious schools and the civil war of the 1990s. A direct line from American aid in the 1980s to the attacks

[3] The term comes from intelligence usage, where it describes the unintended and often harmful results of a covert operation. Johnson (2000) gave it wider currency.

of 2001 therefore oversimplifies a complex relationship. Rashid (2000) also argues that the rise of the Taliban was closely linked to the power vacuum left by the collapse of the communist government and the civil war that followed. This insight is important for the present study, because it suggests that the collapse of a state, and not ideology alone, created the conditions in which militant groups and their foreign supporters could thrive (Rashid, 2000).

3.2 State Sponsorship and the Role of Pakistan

Another important area of research looks at how states interact with militant organisations. Byman (2005) points out that when states tolerate or actively support militants, counterterrorism becomes much harder, since the sponsoring state can provide safe havens, funding, and legitimacy while avoiding accountability. Fair (2014) applies this logic to Pakistan, arguing that its military, driven by its rivalry with India, sought "strategic depth" in Afghanistan, which shaped its support for the Taliban. This created a paradox: Pakistan was both an ally of the United States and a backer of the insurgents that the United States was fighting (Byman, 2005; Fair, 2014). Scholars differ on how much weight sanctuary deserves. Jones (2009) gives heavy weight to Pakistani sanctuary in the revival of the insurgency, whereas Giustozzi (2008) pays more attention to Afghan grievances and to the Taliban's ability to adapt on the ground.

As a result, any explanation for the Taliban's persistence after 2001 must consider the regional political landscape. This is especially important in Afghanistan, where no government has fully accepted the border with Pakistan, and neighbouring countries have historically viewed Afghan politics as an extension of their own security concerns.

3.3 The Law, Self-Defence and Legitimacy

A third area of research looks at the legal foundations of the war. The United States relied on its right of self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter, on Security Council Resolutions 1368 and 1373, and on its own Authorization for Use of Military Force. These sources are different in kind and should not be treated as one. The Authorization is domestic law, and it gave the President the power to act (Authorization for Use of Military Force, 2001). Article 51 is the international legal claim (United Nations, 1945), and the Security Council resolutions recognised the right of self-defence without clearly authorising a particular operation (United Nations Security Council, 2001a, 2001b).[4] NATO's invocation of Article 5 added political and collective support (North Atlantic Treaty, 1949), but it was not a legal authorisation on its own.

In 2001, most states accepted this rationale, although this was political acceptance and not a unanimous legal endorsement. However, debate continues over how much responsibility a state that "harbours" terrorists should bear for an armed attack, particularly over whether the Taliban's ties with al-Qaeda were close enough to attribute the 9/11 attacks to Afghanistan as a state. Questions also remain about whether the force used was necessary and proportionate, and about what legal basis supported the long intervention after the Taliban government had fallen. These discussions matter because legality helped build the first international consensus behind the invasion. They also help explain why it became harder to define the purpose of the war once its original justification had been met.

3.4 The Light-Footprint Strategy and the Conduct of War

Research on the initial campaign treats 2001 as an example of a new approach to warfare, built on precision air power, special forces, and local ground allies. Biddle (2003) provides a notable analysis of this strategy. Other scholars study the aftermath, and focus on how the Taliban regrouped in Pakistan and revived the insurgency from about 2003 (Giustozzi, 2008; Jones, 2009). Taken together, these accounts show that the strategy produced a swift victory but also limited the ability of the United States to control events afterwards, since it relied on local partners whose goals did not always match its own (Biddle, 2003). Their

[4] Resolution 1368 condemned the attacks and recognised the inherent right of individual and collective self-defence. It was not a Chapter VII resolution authorising Operation Enduring Freedom. Resolution 1386 of December 2001 was different in kind, since it established ISAF under Chapter VII.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue X October 2026

focus, however, is mainly military and operational. They say less about the kind of political order that such a victory could allow.

3.5 State-Building and the Reasons for Failure

The final theme asks why reconstruction fell short. Rubin (2002) highlights the fragility of Afghan institutions and the complications that arose from empowering warlords. SIGAR (2021) documents corruption and unrealistic objectives, and Whitlock (2021), drawing on interviews collected by SIGAR, shows that many officials privately doubted that the effort was working. These works agree that external actors set goals which Afghan institutions could not realistically achieve. They differ on where the problem lay: Rubin points mainly to the structure of the Afghan state, while SIGAR and Whitlock point mainly to American planning and management. What they tend to overlook is how this problem is linked to the way the war was won in 2001.

Although substantial scholarship examines both the 2001 campaign and the collapse of 2021, these episodes are often analysed through separate military, regional, and institutional frameworks. Johnson's (2000) concept of blowback, Byman's (2005) study of state-sponsored militancy, and Rubin's (2002) insights into state fragmentation each shed light on one part of the story, yet none alone explains how a swift military victory led to political collapse. Rubin (2002) also shows that Afghan rulers have long depended on external resources, so dependence in itself is not a new idea. What the existing literature does not make clear is how a particular way of winning, through air power and local allies, shaped the dependence that followed. This article brings these episodes together through the victory–vacuum–dependence model.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This framework is built on a straightforward idea: the way a war is won influences the political order that can be established afterwards. In Afghanistan, the 2001 victory was achieved through air power and local allies instead of a large occupying force. While this kept costs down, it also meant that the United States had limited control over who would take power once the Taliban were removed. Biddle's (2003) account of the campaign and Rubin's (2002) analysis of state fragmentation can be read together to support this idea. When local allies fight on behalf of an external power, they gain significant influence over the emerging state. If the new government relies heavily on foreign aid and on those same allies, its legitimacy rests on external support and not on the trust of its own citizens.

The study therefore proposes a "victory–vacuum–dependence" model. This section defines each stage, explains how the stages are linked, and states what the model does not claim. It sets the stage for the discussion in Section 6.

4.1 The Four Stages

- Victory. The rapid defeat of the incumbent regime through external force and local partners.
- Vacuum. The absence of an accepted political settlement and of institutions able to exercise authority across the country.
- Dependence. The reliance of the new state on foreign financing, military support, contractors, and patronage networks.
- Exposure. The failure of institutions once external support is withdrawn.

4.2 Causal Mechanisms

Five mechanisms connect these stages.

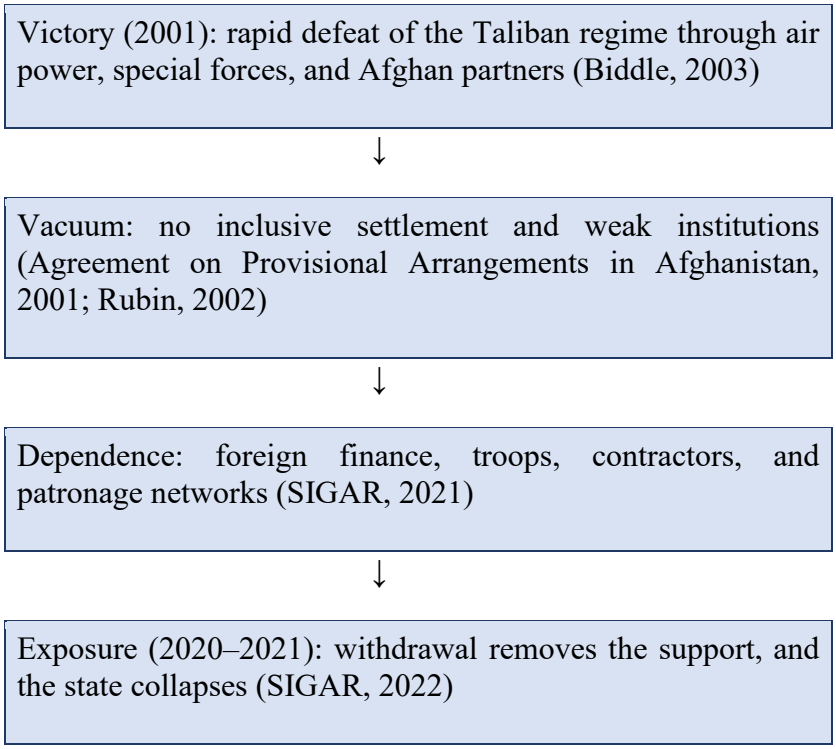
- Reliance on armed local partners strengthens actors who can obstruct central authority.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue X October 2026

- A narrow initial deployment limits control over the post-conflict period.
- External funding reduces the incentive to build a sustainable domestic revenue base.
- Military and administrative dependence weakens the autonomous capacity of the state.
- Withdrawal changes expectations, morale, bargaining behaviour, and the calculations of elites.

Figure 1 summarises the sequence.

Figure 1: The Victory–Vacuum–Dependence–Exposure Model



Note: The model shows a sequence of linked conditions, not a single deterministic cause. Source: Events and dates are taken from the Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan (2001), the Doha Agreement (Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, 2020), and SIGAR (2021, 2022). The framework is the author's own, built on Rubin (2002) and Biddle (2003).

4.3 Alternative Explanations

The model does not claim that the light-footprint strategy made the collapse of 2021 inevitable. Other factors also mattered, including Pakistani sanctuary, the exclusion of the Taliban from the Bonn settlement, the Iraq War, failures of leadership, corruption, disputed elections, shifts in American strategy, and the terms of the Doha Agreement. In this article they are treated as factors that acted on the vacuum and deepened the dependence, and not as replacements for the sequence. Section 6 considers each of them where the evidence allows, and Section 6.6 returns to the objection that Pakistan's role limits what can be learned from Afghanistan.

A fuller test of the model would ask what a larger footprint might have produced. It could have given the United States more control over the post-2001 order, but it could also have provoked the kind of resistance that the Soviet occupation met. The model therefore does not claim that a heavier footprint would have succeeded. Its claim is narrower: the way the war was won shaped the political order that followed.

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THE METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative and interpretive approach to examine the connection between the swift military victory of 2001 and the political collapse of 2021. It draws primarily on secondary sources, supported by primary documents. Sources were selected on three criteria. They had to come from university presses, peer-reviewed outlets, or recognised institutions such as the United Nations, NATO, the United States government, and SIGAR.

They had to deal directly with one or more stages of the model. And, where possible, they had to represent different views, so that the account does not rest on a single school of thought. The documents range from the UN Charter of 1945 to news reports published in 2026. Reports from established news agencies are used only for developments after 2021, and only where other sources support the main facts.

Three methods of analysis are employed. The first is historical analysis, which looks at the sequence of events from the Soviet invasion up to the 2021 withdrawal and shows how these events are connected. The second is document and content analysis of legal texts (such as the UN Charter, Security Council resolutions, the North Atlantic Treaty, and the congressional authorisation), official reports (including the 9/11 Commission Report and SIGAR publications), presidential statements, and the Doha Agreement.

This approach makes it possible to see how the use of force was justified and how policy changed over time. The third is the interpretive reading of academic books and journal articles in order to assess strategies and outcomes.

Taken together, the three methods follow a structured historical interpretation. The sequence of events is traced stage by stage, and each link in the model is checked against the evidence for it and against the alternative explanations in Section 4.3. Official accounts, such as presidential statements and government reports, are compared with academic and independent sources, because officials had reasons to present their decisions in a favourable light.

When sources conflict, the article states the disagreement and does not adopt one version without reason. These sources are sufficient for the purpose of this article, which is to examine the proposed sequence of events and not to measure the size of each effect.

There are certain limitations to the study. First, it contains no interviews or archival documents and is based only on published materials. Second, almost all the sources are in English and come from Western institutions, so the account may give more weight to external actors than to Afghan perspectives. Afghan-language scholarship, interviews, and the internal records of the Afghan government would add to it. Third, the figures on civilian casualties and expenditure are disputed and are therefore given as estimates, together with the name of the source. Fourth, since events in Afghanistan are still developing, the situation could be different when this article is published.

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Origins and Legal Justification

The causes of the invasion operated at three levels. The immediate cause was the attacks of 11 September, which killed almost 3,000 people, and the belief that al-Qaeda had planned them under the protection of the Taliban. Public opinion called for a strong response, and within days Congress approved the use of force against those responsible and against anyone who had sheltered them (Authorization for Use of Military Force, 2001).

On 20 September 2001, President George W. Bush told Congress that the Taliban should hand over the leaders of al-Qaeda, among them bin Laden, close its camps, and allow inspections (Bush, 2001). The Taliban leadership did not accept these demands. Its replies suggested at most that bin Laden might be tried

in a third country or that it might ask for evidence, and Jones (2009) states that Washington saw these replies as a delaying move.[5]

The historical background explains the structural reasons. Johnson's (2000) idea of blowback is relevant here, but it should be read with the caution noted in Section 3.1. The anti-Soviet war, foreign assistance channelled largely through Pakistan, transnational mobilisation, and the collapse of the Afghan state after 1989 helped create an armed regional environment from which later militant organisations emerged. This does not mean that the Taliban or al-Qaeda were simply direct creations of American policy (Coll, 2004; Fair, 2014; Rashid, 2000).

Western interest fell after 1989, and civil war followed. India, Iran, and Russia, among other regional powers, supported the Northern Alliance. The result was a divided regional environment that the United States later had to manage.

The strategic and ideological cause was a change in outlook under the Bush administration, when terrorism and the states that supported it were placed at the heart of American foreign policy and pre-emptive action was accepted.

The legal justification had several layers. At home, the Authorization for Use of Military Force gave the President the power to act. Internationally, the United States told the Security Council that it was acting in self-defence under Article 51, and Resolution 1368 had already recognised that right after the attacks (United Nations Security Council, 2001a). NATO invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty for the first time on 12 September and confirmed its invocation on 4 October, after evidence had been presented that al-Qaeda was responsible (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2001).

This gave the operation political and collective backing. It was not, however, a Security Council authorisation of Operation Enduring Freedom. After the Taliban government fell, the continued foreign presence rested mainly on the consent of the Afghan authorities and on the Security Council mandate for ISAF (United Nations Security Council, 2001c).

Some commentators claim that broader objectives, including influence in Central Asia and access to energy routes, also played a part. The documents consulted for this article provide only limited direct evidence that these aims drove the decision, and much of the literature treats them as secondary considerations. Concern for the treatment of Afghan women under Taliban rule was also raised in official statements in late 2001, and it later became part of the argument for staying. The evidence considered here suggests, however, that security concerns carried more weight when the decision to go to war was made. The invasion should therefore be understood as motivated mainly by security concerns and not by economic interests.

6.2 The 2001 Campaign and the Political Vacuum

The campaign followed a new model of warfare, described by Biddle (2003), which had three components: precision air power; small teams of special operations forces and CIA officers who directed the air strikes and worked with local fighters; and Afghan ground forces, especially the Northern Alliance (Biddle, 2003; Coll, 2004). The wish to avoid a large-scale occupation, and memories of the Soviet experience, shaped this strategy. American and British air strikes began on 7 October, and a broader coalition joined later.

The operation moved quickly: Mazar-i-Sharif was captured in early November 2001 and Kabul in mid-November, and Kandahar, the Taliban's spiritual centre, fell in early December. At a UN-organised conference at Bonn that month, the Afghan groups present agreed to set up an interim administration headed by Hamid Karzai, and the Security Council approved an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) for

[5] The Taliban's offers and conditions remain disputed. The leadership said at different times that it would consider a trial of bin Laden in a third country or that it wanted evidence of his role, while Washington described its demands as not open to negotiation. This article follows Jones (2009) in reporting the American reading, but the dispute shows that the refusal was less simple than it is often presented.

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Kabul (Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan, 2001; United Nations Security Council, 2001c). Within the framework outlined above, this is the "victory" stage of the sequence.

In effect, the victory relied heavily on Afghan ground forces and not on a large American occupation force. This is the basis on which the structure of this article rests: the faster the campaign succeeded, the less settled the United States was about who would govern once it had ended. The Taliban were not represented at Bonn, so the settlement was agreed among the winners and other Afghan groups, while the movement that had just lost power remained outside it.

The rapid victory concealed several weaknesses that later became serious problems. Together, they make up the "vacuum" stage of the framework: a situation in which a defeated regime had not yet been replaced by an effective political order.

- The escape of al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders. In December 2001, bin Laden and other senior figures are believed to have escaped into Pakistan from Tora Bora. Critics, including a later report by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, attributed this to the shortage of American ground troops and the reliance on unreliable local militias (United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2009).

- Dependence on warlords. The alliances that helped win the war also gave influence to powerful commanders with poor human-rights records, which weakened the authority of the new central government (Jones, 2009; Rubin, 2002).

- Civilian casualties. Air strikes and night raids killed civilians, and this carried a considerable political cost. Condra et al. (2010) found that civilian harm can increase violence by reducing local support for the intervening forces.

- Pakistan's dual role. Fair (2014) describes how Pakistan cooperated with Washington while sheltering the Taliban leadership, a contradiction that the United States never resolved. This shows how difficult counterinsurgency becomes when a neighbouring state benefits from instability.

- The expansion of the mission and the weakness of institutions. What started as a counterterrorism operation later developed into a counterinsurgency and nation-building effort. Both SIGAR (2021) and Whitlock (2021) indicate that achieving these objectives demanded considerably more resources and local legitimacy than had been expected at the outset, and that corruption caused large quantities of aid to be diverted while also damaging public trust. From 2003 onwards, the war in Iraq also took away attention and resources.

Consequently, these weaknesses should be read as parts of a single problem and not as separate errors. Most of them, whether the escape of leaders, the rise of warlords, or the weakness of institutions, followed largely from the decision to win through local partners. Rubin's (2002) focus on fragmented institutions helps to explain why they were so difficult to correct later.

6.3 State-Building, Insurgency and External Dependence

Afghan responses differed from actor to actor. The Taliban did not fight to the end in 2001; most fighters and leaders moved into the villages or crossed into Pakistan, where they reorganised. Jones (2009) and Giustozzi (2008) describe how the insurgency spread across the south and east from about 2003. It used sanctuary in Pakistan and the resentment felt towards corruption, harsh officials, and foreign troops, and it set up a parallel administration that offered courts and protection in areas where the government was absent (Giustozzi, 2008; Jones, 2009).

The Afghan political elite and a great part of the population tried to build a new system. The Bonn process led to loya jirgas, a new constitution in 2004, and presidential and parliamentary elections. Barfield (2010) and SIGAR (2021) both describe real gains in education and in women's public participation, although the figures differ between sources and are not repeated here.

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However, the government remained heavily dependent on foreign money and troops, and its forces relied on American air support, maintenance, and contractors. SIGAR (2021) shows how much of the cost of the state was met by foreign assistance. This is the "dependence" stage of the model: external funding reduced the pressure to build a domestic revenue base, and the security and administrative capacity of the state came to rest on support that Afghans did not control.

Disputed elections, particularly those of 2014 and 2019, added to the divisions within the elite. Many ordinary Afghans, caught between the insurgents and a government they distrusted, tried to survive rather than take sides.

Neighbouring states also responded. Pakistan hedged its bets; India and Iran supported the Kabul government and its partners, while Russia and China pursued their own interests. Regional rivalries therefore continued to shape the war.

Giustozzi's (2008) work on the "neo-Taliban" is useful here because it shows that the insurgency was not simply a return of the old movement but a new organisation that adapted to local conditions. In other words, the Taliban who returned in 2021 were the product of twenty years of adaptation, and not only of Pakistani sanctuary (Giustozzi, 2008).

6.4 Doha, Withdrawal and Collapse

As the "forever war" continued, public fatigue grew and American priorities changed. Although President Barack Obama ordered a surge in troops in 2009, he promised a transition, and in December 2014 the ISAF combat mission ended and was replaced by a smaller training mission (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, n.d.). After bin Laden was killed in Pakistan in May 2011, many questioned why the mission should continue.

President Donald Trump then negotiated directly with the Taliban. The Doha Agreement of 29 February 2020 established a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign forces in return for Taliban commitments on counterterrorism and an agreement to hold talks with Afghan parties (Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, 2020). The Afghan government was not a party to the agreement, which also provided for the release of up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners. By excluding the Kabul government and fixing a date for withdrawal, the agreement also weakened that government's position in any later bargaining with the Taliban.

President Joe Biden confirmed the withdrawal in April 2021, and the Taliban launched a rapid offensive. Provincial capitals fell one after another. On 15 August 2021, the Taliban entered Kabul as President Ashraf Ghani left the country, and the Afghan security forces, which had been trained and equipped over two decades, largely dissolved. The final American troops left on 30–31 August after a rapid evacuation that moved more than 120,000 people.[6]

This outcome needs explanation and not only description. Several factors seem to have worked together: the dependence of Afghan forces on American air support, maintenance, and contractors, which ended with the withdrawal; weak leadership and low morale; local deals under which units surrendered without fighting; and the expectation, created by the Doha Agreement and the departure of foreign forces, that the Taliban would prevail.

SIGAR (2022) names similar factors, among them the exclusion of the Afghan government from the American–Taliban talks and its failure to recognise that the United States would actually leave. According to the framework, this was the moment when dependence became exposure: the Afghan state was left to stand without the support on which it had been based.

[6] Figures for the evacuation differ by source, depending on whether they count only American flights or all allied flights. They are given here as approximate.

ISSN No. 2321-2705 | DOI: 10.51244/IJRSI |Volume XIII Issue X October 2026

6.5 The Aftermath

The costs of the war were immense. The Costs of War Project (2021) at Brown University estimates, as of 2021, that about 2,400 American service members died, along with many thousands of Afghan civilians and members of the security forces, and that American spending exceeded two trillion dollars.[7] After the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan fell into a deep humanitarian crisis. The foreign aid that had funded much of the previous government came to an end, and billions of dollars in central bank reserves held abroad were frozen. A large part of the population faced food insecurity. The new regime again imposed strict limits on the education and employment of women and girls. Russia, which did so in July 2025, remains the only government to have formally recognised it (Agence France-Presse, 2026).[8] Other states, including China and the United Arab Emirates, have accepted Taliban-appointed ambassadors without formally recognising the government.

Measured against the original objective, al-Qaeda's ability to carry out large-scale attacks has been greatly reduced. Yet the ideas it stands for have proved adaptable, and the Taliban's return has again raised the question of whether Afghanistan will provide a haven for militants. For the United States, the end of the war has also allowed its strategic focus to turn towards competition with China and Russia. The more enduring loss, however, may be political: the hopes that so many Afghans, particularly women and girls, had placed in the new order.

6.6 An Analysis of US and Afghan Strategies

When all the evidence is considered, American strategy changed repeatedly while its political objectives remained unclear. The first objective, destroying al-Qaeda's base and removing the Taliban government, was only partly achieved. The Taliban regime was removed in 2001, but senior leaders escaped, al-Qaeda survived, and the Taliban later returned. The second objective, a stable, democratic, and self-sufficient Afghanistan, was much more difficult, since it required legitimate institutions, a continued commitment, and a settlement acceptable to the supporters of the Taliban. None of these things existed. The evidence discussed in this article therefore indicates that the main failure of American policy was political and not military: the military side was strong, but the political side was weak. Table 1 lists the main phases.

Table 1: Phases of the US Intervention and Afghan Responses, 2001–2021

Phase	US strategy	Afghan responses	Outcome	Link to the model
2001–2002	Light-footprint campaign using air power, special forces and the Northern Alliance	Taliban scatter and retreat to Pakistan; Bonn process starts	Regime falls quickly; senior leaders escape	Victory creates the vacuum. The Bonn Agreement set up an interim administration without the Taliban, and Security Council Resolution 1386 authorised ISAF in and around Kabul (Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan, 2001; United Nations Security Council, 2001c).
2003–2008	ISAF-led stabilisation and reconstruction;	Insurgency regroups in Pakistani	Insurgency spreads in the	The vacuum deepens. SIGAR lists extreme centralisation of the government, endemic corruption, and a

[7] Estimates of casualties and cost differ by source, depending on what is counted, for example contractors, allied forces, and long-term costs such as veterans' care and interest on debt. The figures are given as estimates for that reason, and they date from 2021. Later estimates are higher.

[8] Recognition is a fast-changing matter. The position stated here is the one reported in August 2026, and accepting an ambassador is not the same as formally recognising a government.

	Iraq draws away attention and resources	sanctuary; Karzai government builds new institutions	south and east	struggle for legitimacy among the causes of the later collapse (SIGAR, 2022).
2009–2014	Counterinsurgency and troop surge; security handed to Afghan forces	Taliban run shadow governance; corruption erodes trust; Afghan forces lead	Gains stay fragile; ISAF combat mission ends in 2014	Dependence consolidates. NATO records that ISAF ended in December 2014 and was followed by a non-combat train, advise and assist mission (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, n.d.). SIGAR found that the Afghan government was unfit to lead the war once United States troops and contractors left (SIGAR, 2022).
2015–2021	Advise-and-assist mission; direct talks with the Taliban; Doha Agreement (2020); withdrawal	Taliban negotiate with the US and launch a 2021 offensive; Kabul government and army collapse	Taliban return to power in August 2021	Dependence becomes exposure. The Afghan government was excluded from the talks that produced the Doha Agreement (Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, 2020). SIGAR lists this exclusion, and the government's failure to recognise that the United States would leave, among six factors in the collapse (SIGAR, 2022). The NATO mission ended in September 2021 (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, n.d.).

Note: The first four columns summarise the events discussed in Section 6. The last column is the author's reading of those events in terms of the model, and the official sources named in it support the facts on which that reading rests.

Afghans were not passive recipients of American policy, although the sources used here say little about the choices of ordinary Afghans, and that point is stated with caution. The Northern Alliance used American power to take control of the capital in 2001. The Taliban responded effectively by dispersing, using sanctuary, and later negotiating directly with Washington while the Kabul government was left out. In contrast, the Afghan government based its authority on external support and patronage networks, and when that support came to an end there was little left to keep its army and administration going. The outcome was determined less by battlefield strength than by legitimacy, sanctuary, and organisational endurance.

A reasonable objection is that Pakistan's help to the Taliban limits what can be learned from Afghanistan for other interventions (Fair, 2014). The objection has force, and Pakistani sanctuary is treated in this article as an important factor. Yet sanctuary alone does not explain why a state built over twenty years could not hold. As Table 1 shows, each stage of American strategy was a reaction to the failure of the previous one, and none of them addressed the political vacuum of 2001.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

In response to the two research questions, the article arrives at the following findings.

On the causes of the invasion (Research Question 1). The invasion resulted from several factors operating together. The immediate cause was the 9/11 attacks and the Taliban leadership's refusal to hand over bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders. Underlying these were the effects of the Cold War legacy, the rise of the Taliban with support from Pakistan, the collapse of the Afghan state after 1989, and a new American security doctrine. The use of force was justified through Article 51 of the UN Charter and a congressional authorisation, with political support from NATO under Article 5, while Security Council Resolution 1368

recognised the right of self-defence without authorising the operation. There is little evidence that wider economic or geopolitical motives drove the decision, and although humanitarian arguments supported the war, they did not determine the initial decision.

On the course of the war (Research Question 2). The light-footprint approach produced a swift victory but left a number of problems unresolved: escaped leaders, empowered warlords, civilian harm, Pakistani sanctuary, and a weak state. The shift to counterinsurgency and nation-building was not supported by a workable political strategy, and corruption and dependence on foreign support left the Afghan government vulnerable. The Taliban survived by dispersing and then reorganising, and later by negotiating directly with the United States. Although many Afghans took part in or benefited from the new order, even where they distrusted the government, they could not make it independent. The Doha Agreement was reached without the Afghan government, and the withdrawal that followed in 2021 exposed the weakness of the state, leading to its rapid fall, a humanitarian crisis, the loss of many of the rights gained since 2001, and serious questions about outside military intervention.

These findings have two implications. First, the way a war is won can shape the dependencies of the state that follows, so planners should ask about the political order from the start of a campaign. Second, the model has limits. It rests on one intervention, and Pakistan's role, the Taliban's adaptation, and the Iraq War all affected the outcome. It is therefore best used as a way of organising the evidence and not as a law that predicts every intervention.

CONCLUSION

Military success and political success are not the same, and the war in Afghanistan shows the gap between them. In 2001 the United States achieved its original objectives in part: al-Qaeda lost its base and the Taliban lost the state. However, it could not build, from outside, a government that Afghans would trust enough to defend. The victory left a vacuum, and twenty years of foreign support created dependence and not independence.

The main theoretical contribution of this article is the victory–vacuum–dependence model. Biddle (2003) explains how the 2001 campaign was won, and Rubin (2002) explains why Afghan institutions were fragile, but each looks at only one part of the story. The model joins them: the way a war is won shapes the political order that follows, and that order decides whether the state can stand once outside support ends. The final stage, exposure, shows that the withdrawal revealed weaknesses that were already there and did not create them. The model rests on one case, so it is best used to organise evidence and not to predict outcomes.

The model is also useful for future international interventions. It suggests four questions that planners should ask from the start of a campaign. Who will govern once the old regime falls, and does the settlement include the defeated side? How much power will local allies gain from the way the war is fought? Can the new state raise its own revenue, or will it rely on foreign money? And what will happen to its army and administration if outside support is reduced or ends on a fixed date? Regional diplomacy matters as well, since Byman (2005) and Fair (2014) show how difficult counterinsurgency becomes when a neighbouring state shelters the insurgents. For long-term security, legitimate local institutions, realistic objectives, and a settlement that involves the main parties are necessary.

It is still an open question whether the human and financial cost of the intervention made the world safer, since al-Qaeda was weakened but the roots of extremism remain, and the future of Afghanistan, particularly that of women and girls, is uncertain. The lesson is simple: military victory without a clear plan for the day after is unlikely to produce a durable political order.

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