PERSPECTIVE

Five Lessons We Should Have Learned In Afghanistan

Strategic Issues in Policy Planning

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- The war in Afghanistan has cost $570.9 billion since 2001. [1]
- Before the 2009 surge, more than 2 million troops had deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, 800,000 more than once. [2]
- In mid-2011, there were 99,800 soldiers in Afghanistan and 90,339 contractors [3]
- As of July 12, 2012, more than 3,070 soldiers have died in Afghanistan. More than 15,000 soldiers have been wounded. More than 2,800 contractors have been killed and 15,000 contractors wounded. [4]

Introduction

The US conflict in Afghanistan is moving into its final stages. Over the next eighteen months, the number of US and NATO troops deployed there will decline, Afghan security forces will officially take over responsibility for the country, and the mission will transition from combat to training.

The nature of the challenge will become one of maintenance rather than outright victory – managing the risk posed by a continued Taliban insurgency, rather than defeating the insurgency through military victory.

As the transition in Afghanistan moves forward, it is important to step back and reflect on the lessons we have learned from the last eleven years of conflict.

Much of the retrospective discussion of the war in Afghanistan has focused on early inattention, the efficacy of counterinsurgency doctrine, or the individual decisions made by Presidents Obama and Bush. However, there are more fundamental lessons to be learned from the war in Afghanistan: our magical thinking, misunderstanding the environment, ignoring politics, poor planning, and a disturbing refusal to plan for the future.

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This paper is part of a series the American Security Project is publishing throughout 2012 that examines U.S. foreign policy and its long term strategic effects.

One important way of understanding the strategic effects of foreign policy decisions is to understand recent conflicts – what went right and what went wrong. Establishing metrics (see ASP's recent report, "Measuring Success: Are We Winning in Afghanistan?") aids us in understanding a conflict while it is still ongoing; but with the Afghan conflict winding down we can begin drawing lessons to make future conflicts shorter and less costly.

Many other studies of the lessons learned from Afghanistan focus on overly broad topics or overly narrow ones. How the President arrived at the decision to "surge" troops into the country in 2009 is a broad question that addresses high-level policymaking rather and civil-military relations rather than anything specific to Afghanistan, the operations of the war, or the individual decisions we discuss below.

Whether the counterinsurgency doctrine as expressed in FM 3-24 is appropriate for future conflicts is a narrow question of military operations, but does not address specific issues in Afghanistan or the U.S. government's record, either.

This paper is meant to identify some of the lessons that policymakers and the public need to learn about Afghanistan. It is meant to establish a framework for understanding why the Afghanistan war is in the state it is in, and how policymakers can avoid making similar missteps in the future.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of everything that went wrong in the war; it is, however, meant to spark a public debate about the decisions made by two Presidential administrations from both parties.

The five lessons we identify below encapsulate the clearest examples of policy failures, strategic shortsightedness, and flawed reasoning that have contributed to the Afghanistan war's current status.

These lessons are not the entire story of the war, nor do they account for the successes many commentators also note when discussing the war in Afghanistan. This paper identifies the lessons that are currently not entering the public discourse.

When thinking about the lessons to be drawn from Afghanistan, however, we should also be mindful of how to integrate them into future plans. Accounting for the lessons we identify below could have potentially resulted in a shorter, less costly war.

The following are five lessons we should have learned in Afghanistan.

1. The danger of magical thinking

Magical thinking is causal reasoning that assumes a correlation between acts or utterances and certain outcomes. A rain dance is a very basic example: the belief that dancing in a particular pattern will cause rain clouds to appear. Magical thinking confuses coincidence with causality – assuming actions are related to an outcome when they are not.

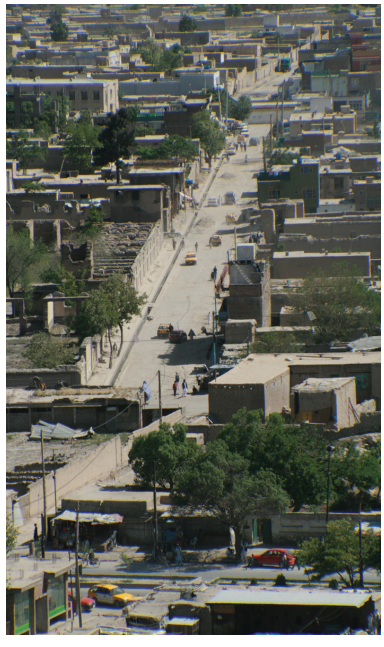
Magical thinking is based in human nature: assuming patterns and seeing connections between events and actions enabled humans to evolve. "Survival requires recognizing patterns—night follows day, berries that color will make you ill." [5]

The US government has engaged in significant magical thinking in Afghanistan.

For the last ten years, military and civilian leaders have promised that if something was built, or a certain area of the country was "cleared" of militants, or if some other singular event like a presidential election took place, the war would be won. It was the political equivalent of a rain dance – rather than understanding the complex reasons why bad things happened in Afghanistan, policymakers chose to assume that simple fixes could produce victory.

The result was expensive – not just in lives, but in money.

Karl Eikenberry, who commanded US forces in Afghanistan and later served as ambassador, recently told Stanford News about the danger of magical thinking. "When we went into Afghanistan," he said, "it's fair to say that all of us – the international community, the Americans, the Afghans – did not fully understand the level of effort that would be needed to achieve some of the goals and objectives that we initially set for ourselves." [6]



The Kajaki Dam in Helmand province is a perfect example of magical thinking. Originally begun as a USAID project in the early 1950s, the dam quickly became a model of development in the region. Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital of Helmand, became known as "Little America" because of the number of aid workers who lived there and built new neighborhoods in their own image. USAID remained involved in Helmand province until the Soviet Invasion of 1979, and didn't return until after the Taliban government had fallen.

Many in the US considered the Kajaki power plant a symbol of American commitment to Afghanistan and the best way to ensure the long term viability of southern Afghanistan. [7] In 2004, USAID contracted out work to repair the dam and restore the power plants. [8] NATO never established control of the area [9] and by 2007 had fought a series of pitched battles to try to chase away insurgents. [10] Construction on the turbines that would restore the power plant to operational capacity, stalled—leading one aid worker in 2010 to declare it "a massive concession, not only of failure, but of defeat."[11]

In 2008 British troops assembled nearly 5,000 troops in a hundred-vehicle convoy to deliver a new turbine to the Kajaki power plant. [12] Two months later, however, it lay un-installed in a courtyard outside the dam facility (described by a reporter as "deep inside Taliban territory"). [13] After part of the existing dam was repaired, Afghan officials complained that it was sending electricity to areas the Taliban controlled – essentially letting them profit from taxing the electricity Western workers and soldiers were struggling to generate. [14]

Nearly three years after delivering the new turbine, it still sat unopened outside the power plant. With recent economic growth in Helmand and in nearby Kandahar dramatically increasing demand, even the new turbine can't produce enough electricity to help the locals. [15]

Despite these many setbacks, failures, and false starts, the US still plans to spend $471 million over the next two years to try to finish the dam. [16] US officials insist that Kajaki is vital to the future of southern Afghanistan, even though years of work have not yet fixed the dam.

There is no reason to assume the province will suddenly become secure should everything on the dam function, however. US officials are thinking magically about Kajaki, assuming that completing a single massive piece of infrastructure will somehow remedy southern Afghanistan's insecurity.

The Tarakhil power plant, built outside of Kabul, is another example of magical thinking. USAID designed and built the plant in 2009, through a contractor, to provide electricity for Kabul. [17]

However, the diesel power plant has cost over three times as much as similar power plants in Pakistan, and its annual operating cost of $280 million is more than a third of Afghanistan's total tax revenues. [18] Years after its official opening, however, Tarakhil produces almost no electricity because the diesel fuel needed to run the plant costs more than the rate charged to Kabul residents. The power plant will almost certainly never be able to sustain itself without massive subsidies. [19]

Tarakhil is magical thinking: assuming a complex issue can be solved with a simple solution, in this case one that actually makes the issue worse. Juma Nawandish, the former deputy minister of energy and water, told a reporter that he never asked for a power plant to be built nearby. [20] He wanted to develop Afghanistan's northern gas fields so the expensive imports of diesel fuel would be unnecessary. Nearby lakes and rivers could have provided far cheaper hydropower. But US planners wanted a diesel plant, so they built it.

Magical thinking isn't limited to failed power plants. Road construction is another area where US officials assume a simple solution will solve a complex issue: that certain kinds of development will create security. In 2008, a senior counterinsurgency advisor for the US Army wrote on the influential Small Wars Journal site about the value of road construction. [21] "Like the Romans, counterinsurgents through history have engaged in road-building as a tool for projecting military force, extending governance and the rule of law, enhancing political communication and bringing economic development, health and education to the population."

Another writer who was embedded with US forces made the case more succinctly: "Roads are development magic."[22] Roads, however, are not magic: they are roads. While the military was explaining how roads would cure the many complex problems of rural Afghanistan, Taliban militants were using those newly paved roads to lay siege to villages,[23] capture entire districts,[24] brutally attack road construction crews,[25] and execute complex ambushes against Coalition forces.[26]

Using data leaked onto the internet by Wikileaks, university researchers have shown that over the past several years attacks in Afghanistan have been concentrated along highways — the largest paved roads in the country.[27] The result is that roads have actually contributed to insecurity in Afghanistan by facilitating the movement and activity of the insurgency.

There are countless cases of the US engaging in magical thinking in Afghanistan. From politics to construction, from insurgent reconciliation to night raids, policymakers seem to (incorrectly) believe that simple actions will fix complex challenges.

2. Understand the Environment

Counterinsurgency advocates have insisted for years on the importance of understanding the enemy and the population where you're working. It is a lesson the US Army is trying to internalize. Colonel Thomas Roe, the director of the US Army's Center for Lessons Learned, recently said in an interview that troops need to adopt a more cultural approach to fight effectively in places like Afghanistan: "That goes very deep in the sense that one village may be different culturally from the next one."[28]

However, this understanding has most often taken the form of crash courses in "culture" during pre-deployment training for some soldiers. Tens of thousands of other civilians have also served in Afghanistan, but one would be hard pressed to identify where increased cultural understanding has become practice.

For example, a new part of pre-deployment training for soldiers involves teaching them agriculture: beekeeping, tree pruning, and other practices.[29] The training lasts one week and takes place in Central California, which trainers say is similar to Afghanistan ("fertile valleys, semi-arid plains and mountains").

While these short agricultural training camps sound innovative, they bump up against other efforts to account for Afghanistan's farming culture. Agribusiness Development Teams, or ADTs, are National Guard units from US farming communities that already travel around Afghanistan with the purpose of liaising with local farmers. [30] Many ADTs encounter Afghan demonstration farms,[31] which seem to function and thrive without much western input. [32] Afghan farmers even teach the ADTs about local farming conditions and issues. [33] It is difficult to see why and how Afghans actually need help farming – whether from an ADT or from regular soldiers who spent a week at an orchard in California.

The US government's approach to understanding Afghanistan is based on superficial assumptions and does not account for what Afghans already know. Soldiers cannot meaningfully learn about Afghanistan's farming culture or techniques in a weeklong crash course in California. Experienced farmers who deploy with the specific purpose of supporting Afghanistan's farms arrive surprised at Afghans' ability to farm on their own.

What deploying soldiers really need to learn is how and why Afghan farmers do certain things – like using shovels to dig irrigation canals near roads. Many soldiers have confused Afghan farmers engaged in basic construction work with insurgents laying IEDs. [34] Learning to tell the difference – which doesn't require a week of beekeeping – will lead to a better understanding of the environment.

Understanding the environment cannot only be a military affair: it requires efforts from beyond the military. In reflecting on the war in Afghanistan at the end of 2011, then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said, "One of the most important lessons… is that military success is not sufficient to win: economic development, institution building and the rule of law, promoting internal reconciliation, good governance, providing basic services to the people are essential to success in state building." [35]

Gates was indirectly referencing Clausewitz's dictum that war must serve politics – a refrain that has become cliché. The public discourse about the war, however, is dominated by an arbitrary debate over troop

numbers rather than discussing any substantive political goals or even an end state to the conflict. [36] The current strategy favored by the White House, transitioning security responsibility to the Afghan National Security Forces, is a military-first policy that does not include a political, cultural, or economic component. [37]

For example, a recent project spearheaded by the US Embassy in Kabul created an Afghan version of Sesame Street in December of 2011. [38] "Teachers here in Afghanistan will discover that Sesame Street can help children start school well prepared," said the US ambassador to Kabul, Ryan Crocker. "Perhaps most importantly, it shows children the world around them."

The problem with bringing Sesame Street to Afghanistan is that most homes do not have any electricity. It is magical thinking born of not understanding the environment. Despite the international community spending nearly $60 billion to develop Afghanistan's electrical infrastructure, only 497,000 of Afghanistan's 4.8 million households have any access to electricity. [39] According to the most recent UN data, Afghanistan's per capita GDP is only about $500, or less than $2 per day, [40] yet it costs Afghans $11 per month to power a television. Every single light bulb costs $2.60 per day.

The Sesame Street project is not just an example of magical thinking – assuming that a TV show will somehow get more children through school – it is also astonishingly ignorant of the local conditions that will prevent it from ever having an effect on Afghan children. Even "tweaks" the show's producers came up with – calling dancing "exercise" in an effort not to offend conservative Muslim parents – rings so false it is difficult to understand what the project leaders were thinking when they created it. Additionally, an understanding of basic infrastructure in the country would have shown that creating a high-cost American-imported children's show wouldn't have a chance to be successful because so few would ever have the opportunity to watch it.

The war in Afghanistan has been fought largely outside a basic understanding of the country and its culture. As a result, many missteps have been made and billions of dollars wasted on schemes that had little chance of success. Moreover, what should have been a collaborative effort between the military and civilian agencies of the government has been overly militarized and focused on narrow military objectives. Even the much-vaunted "civilian surge" [41] – meant to supplement the military mission, no less – never fully materialized. [42] A better understanding of the society in which a war takes place will allow for less expenditure and fewer lost lives.

3. The war is a political conflict

If one thing has been missing from US policy in Afghanistan, it is Afghan politics.

US officials routinely complain about the behavior of Afghan President Hamid Karzai. These complaints have become widespread enough that one general was relieved of his command last year for speaking them too freely. [43] US officials complain about Hamid Karzai because they do not understand Afghan politics. Karzai's domestic political context makes his behavior understandable, even predictable.

As an example, President Karzai has remarked that he would side with Pakistan in the event of a conflict with the United States. [44] While Karzai certainly did not express his point very well, his comments stem from the legitimate position that the Afghan government is not interested in a war with Pakistan, even if it means upsetting its American benefactor. It was an attempt to deescalate a growing issue of insecurity along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. [45]

Understanding why Afghanistan's political leaders behave the way they do is critical to creating policies and plans that will work most effectively with them. Karzai is right now in the middle of a major political campaign both within his own cabinet and with the major Pashtun figures in the parliament to build

enough support to finish his term. One of the ways he has been doing that is by playing up his opposition to the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan: complaining about night raids [46] and civilian casualties. [47] When US officials publicly berate him, Karzai can further his argument that he is opposing the US, and it makes him look weak in the eyes of his Afghan rivals. It sends the message that Karzai is still dependent on the U.S., but also incapable of doing the many things US officials want him to do to start cleaning up the Afghan government. It creates an intolerable situation.

Hamid Karzai must navigate difficult domestic politics. Afghanistan does not have the benefit of strong institutions, so governance is based on relationships and patronage: trading favors or appointments, for money. In the West, this practice is normally called corruption.

In Afghanistan, though "corruption" is, how the system works. Karzai could not have removed the warlord Ismail Khan from Herat in 2004, for instance, if he hadn't offered Khan a ministerial position to compensate him for the loss of power and privilege. [48] Nor could he have simply wished away Gul Agha Sherzai's predatory rule of Kandahar without promising him power, money, and influence elsewhere (in that case, the province of Nangarhar, where Sherzai is now governor). [49] With only limited power to coerce his rivals, and moral suasion of limited value in a land ruled by ruthless, unsentimental men, patronage (or corruption) is just about the only tool an Afghan president has.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration has vested its political fortunes in a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said recently that President Obama's 2010 policy review emphasized that "our civilian and military efforts must support a durable and favorable political resolution of the conflict. In 2011, we will intensify our regional diplomacy to enable a political process to promote peace and stability in Afghanistan."[50]

Yet, the Obama plan for negotiation has neglected to incorporate Afghan politics into its negotiation strategy. Multiple groups of political Afghans, from within and without the government, are now organizing to resist the US's attempts to negotiate with the Taliban because American negotiators are not cognizant of Afghan politics. Many pro-government figures in Afghanistan have built lucrative positions, homes, and careers – they are afraid of losing that in a settlement. As a result, broad swaths of Afghanistan's politicians are opposed to the current negotiations bid. Hamid Karzai has publicly condemned some aspects of the US negotiations policy. His government has deliberately undermined other attempts to start the process. [51] Opposition groups have also rejected the US negotiations track: In mid-2011 a large rally convened by a previously unheard of group, the National Movement, was held in Kabul to protest the negotiations. [52]

Many Afghans reject the US negotiations track because there is no consensus about what Afghanistan will look like after the 2014 withdrawal. That is because no one has ever created a viable political framework for the country. The goal of negotiations shouldn't be an end to all disputes in Afghanistan (since that is impossible); it should instead be the creation of a political framework that allows Afghans to work out their disputes without resorting to violence. While the US says it is doing that, from the publicly discussed aspects of the negotiations there is no talk of a framework to manage future disputes – just a demand that the Taliban stop fighting.

The US approach rejects political context, which goes a long way to explaining why policymakers still don't understand how Afghanistan works. Without an appropriate political framework, any policy will fail to engage properly with Afghanistan's politics – and thus will not end successfully.

4. A failure to plan

The US war in Afghanistan suffered from a failure to enact plans that make sense to regular Afghans. This failing took many forms: by building schools, roads, and hospitals but not providing any way to sustainably maintain them; by creating a cash economy but not devising a system of accountability to limit corruption; and by sending outsiders to administer communities they did not understand.

The US has focused much of its effort on infrastructure development. This was most clearly articulated by Rory Stewart, then running a small NGO in Afghanistan and now a British Member of Parliament. In 2007, he made a bold suggestion for how to approach Afghanistan: "To win [Afghans] over we should focus on large, highly visible infrastructure to which Afghans will be able to point in 50 years — just as they point to the great dam built by the United States in the 1960s."[53]

It was a startling argument, especially considering the essay argued forcefully for limiting western ambitions in Afghanistan. The US-led reconstruction of Afghanistan has focused on visible, easily-measured construction projects but has neglected what effect those projects have had: do more people drink clean water, have electricity, access medical care, and learn to read? Even ignoring boondoggles like the $400 million dollar inoperable power plant outside of Kabul, [54] the reconstruction effort has been marked more by magical thinking, [55] unfounded assumptions about local needs, [56] and pervasive corruption. [57]

Despite the concerted effort to improve Afghanistan, projects have faltered for predictable reasons. The international community has built schools without training or hiring teachers, [58] roads that are too dangerous to travel on because of insurgents and criminals, [59] and hospitals without doctors or medicine. [60] It is difficult to argue that these projects have materially helped Afghans become more educated, travel more easily, or gain access to better healthcare. Similarly, it is easy to see how such poorly planned projects could create resentment and frustration in the communities they're meant to serve.

The reason infrastructure projects didn't make any sense is because they were conceived backward. Building schools, roads, and hospitals is really just building the inputs to Afghanistan's infrastructure. The true measure of these inputs is how well the resulting infrastructure works. If a school building has a "Made in America" sign but the community doesn't have teachers and cannot afford books, it stands not as a testament to American goodwill but to American incompetence. The measure of effectiveness for a school is not building it or filling it with children, but actually educating children and improving literacy.

Similarly, roads that cannot be used because of illegal checkpoints or homemade bombs don't really help communities. Basic road transportation along Afghanistan's highways remains incredibly dangerous, [61] which limits people's ability to move freely. Despite enormous efforts at paving roads, those roads have done precious little to materially improve Afghan communities.

Lastly, hospitals that do not actually treat patients really don't help Afghans or the international community's image. [62] Most hospitals in Afghanistan struggle with basics: enough beds, enough medicine, and most importantly enough doctors and nurses to run them safely and effectively. Building hospitals is an important step in providing healthcare to the country, but without also training more medical personnel and keeping them properly resourced the effort is not just wasted but actively antagonistic. It teases Afghans with the prospect of healthcare but doesn't actually provide it.

The poor planning is not limited to infrastructure, however. World Bank President Robert Zoellick wrote in 2011 of the desperate need for Afghans to develop the private sector: "Beyond security and corruption, obstacles that businesses face include expensive and unreliable power, no proper land registration system, and weak legal structures." [63]

The idea of developing Afghanistan's economy is almost as old as Operation Enduring Freedom itself. Yet, despite spending $57 billion on aid and development [64] and an economy with seemingly strong aggregate numbers, [65] the Afghan economy rests on shaky foundations. Nearly 90 percent of the country's growth comes from foreign aid. [66] And future prospects for growth are hobbled by the pervasive lack of electricity. [67] The Kabul Bank scandal, [68] wherein powerful Afghans looted the bank of its reserves and embezzled more than $1 billion, demonstrated the hollowness at the heart of the Afghan government and economy. It is almost hopelessly corrupt, thanks to years of cash infusions by the international community that were never monitored or accounted for.

At the local level, the Afghanistan economy is almost entirely dependent on spending by the international community, especially on security measures. [69] While some areas have thriving small businesses, [70] the moment international money dries up, these local economies will likely collapse. [71] There has been almost no planning for building a normal economy in Afghanistan outside of Kabul and a few big cities, and Afghans will pay the price.

There is no reason for this to be the case. Afghanistan has the potential to have a thriving agricultural economy with limited manufacturing and mineral extraction industries as well. Enabling those industries, however, is not easy – it requires many years of hard work building the institutions that govern a functioning economy: trustworthy banks, a working small-scale credit system, sufficient security to ensure a favorable investment climate, a legal framework to establish a social contract, and so on. The international community simply never made the development of these institutions a priority, which left Afghanistan's economy a hollowed out mess.

5. Real success only matters over the long term

If the US government had planned, in 2001, on staying in Afghanistan through 2014, it would have made very different plans for the country than what has happened the last ten years. The old cliché about Vietnam – it was not a ten-year war but a one-year war fought ten times – applies to Afghanistan as well. Planning cycles rarely accounted for events more than 12 months into the future, which means the long-term consequences of any given policy were largely ignored.

As soldiers arrive on the battlefields of Afghanistan, they face enormous expectations to show "progress." It is an impossible situation: the military's counterinsurgency strategy requires, by all accounts, years to implement and even longer to succeed. Yet officers are pressured, both by political considerations in Washington and command expectations in Kabul, to accomplish big objectives in very short time frames. Because it's rare for a tour of duty to last more than 12 months, commanders are severely constrained in what choices they can make. It's difficult to be slow and deliberate when one must show progress, right now, in time for a Congressional hearing or a strategic review. Those pressures constrain incentives and shape day-to-day decision-making.

The village of Tarok Kolache provides a useful example of how policies enacted with an eye toward the short term can undermine long-term objectives. On October 6, 2010, Lieutenant Colonel David Flynn,

charged with clearing the tiny village of Tarok Kolache in the Arghandab district of southeast Afghanistan, called in 49,200 pounds of rockets and aerial bombs, leveling it completely. According to Paula Broadwell, a former adviser to General David Petraeus, Flynn believed that the village was empty of civilians and full of explosive traps. The Taliban, Broadwell recounted for ForeignPolicy.com, had "conducted an intimidation campaign" to chase away the villagers and promptly set up shop inside the village. [72]

In earlier attempts to clear it, Flynn's unit had taken heavy losses, including multiple amputations from homemade explosives and several dead. He decided the only reasonable way to "clear" the mine-riddled village was to bomb it to the ground. When Tarok Kolache's residents tried to return to the homes their families had maintained for generations, they found nothing but dust. Flynn offered them money for reconstruction and reimbursement, but getting it required jumping a long series of bureaucratic hoops, some of them controlled by notoriously corrupt local politicians. Flynn, and later Broadwell, declared it a success.

Eighteen months later, the decision to destroy the village has several consequences that are still being felt in the area. Immediately after destroying the village, U.S. forces reached out to the Afghan Border Police, run by a notorious warlord named Abdul Raziq, for help in securing the area. Raziq has a well-established reputation for corruption and drug smuggling, and human rights groups accuse him of perpetrating a mass murder. [73] Even if that reputation is unwarranted, Raziq's border force did not have legal jurisdiction to use force in Tarok Kolache, according to a Canadian former embedded military trainer who served in Kandahar. [74] In this part of Kandahar, Afghan forces are generally considered destabilizing factors because of their disputes with the local people. [75]

In addition, there are other serious considerations that will take years to play out. The destruction of Tarok Kolache also laid waste to the nearby pomegranate groves, the village's primary source of income. While the US forces replanted the groves with new pomegranate trees, they won't be back to full maturity – which is needed to generate income for the village – for another four years. The destruction of Tarok Kolache will continue to have an economic impact until at least 2016 as a result. The US also reorganized social relationships in the area when they decided to administer reconstruction funds through a local Afghan government official instead of the traditional village elders. The US was, in effect, picking new winners and losers in the village, and it is difficult to predict how that will play out in the future.

Morgan Sheeran, a Master Sergeant who taught at the Counterinsurgency Training Center in Kabul, explained that decisions are often made in the moment without understanding their long-term consequences. [76] Drastic policies like destroying entire villages also have drastic consequences, and there is very little consideration given to the long-term effects of decisions.

Another example of short-term needs outweighing long-term considerations is the development of local militia groups. In the first few years of the war, US and Afghan policymakers were worried about the effect of Afghanistan's many local militias. These militias had created a lawless environment many blamed for the rise of the Taliban. Especially around Gul Agha Sherzai's Kandahar, the militias had created such a dangerous, chaotic environment that the city welcomed the Taliban's violent

purge. Writing in 1994, a Wall Street Journal reporter said the Taliban "weren't so scary" compared to those militias, and that the Taliban "may be the best thing that has happened to Afghanistan in years." [77]

Many Afghans were terrified that the removal of the Taliban would mean the return of militias. While the US armed some militia groups in the early days of the war (including Sherzai's Kandahar militia), public outcry quickly forced it to abandon the practice. [78] It joined the UN to enact a $300 million dollar Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program. [79] The idea was that militia fighters could be persuaded to put down their weapons and take up more gainful employment.

The DDR program never really worked, however. Studies shows that the DDR program's failure to adequately employ demobilized fighters led to higher-than-before levels of violence in some parts of the country – not from the insurgency but from fighters angry about the broken promise of demobilization. [80] A follow-up program, Disarmament of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG), "clearly failed to reach its stated goal" of disbanding armed groups by 2007 because it never received the funding or administrative support needed for the program to succeed. [81]

Even as policymakers grew frustrated with their inability to disband Afghanistan's militias, they thought their 2007 success in Iraq was due to the successful use of militias. Thus, when he was CENTCOM Commander in 2008, General David Petraeus announced his intention to build up tribal militias in Afghanistan to replicate the "Sons of Iraq" movement west of Baghdad. [82] ISAF implemented a number of programs designed to "raise local militias" for communal defense around the country. [83]

The use of militias to achieve security goals then came full circle. Once again, policymakers embraced the idea of fighting through militias, even though the Afghans had begged military leaders to disband them. In a few localized cases, US military leaders had tried to re-constitute local militias, but all of them failed to achieve their stated goals. [84] These militias either defected to the Taliban [85] or engaged in such rampant abuses they were disbanded. [86] Despite a history of failure and rejection by the people of Afghanistan, in 2009 the US military, under the leadership of Generals Stanley McChrystal and David Petraeus, once again made local, tribal militias the centerpiece of their strategy. [87]

The local militia strategy has secured some areas, [88] but these same groups have also engaged in organized criminal activity. [89] Afghan and US officials have expressed fear of the militias, [90] and reports of abuse are rampant. [91] Human rights groups are stepping up criticism of the abuse in which these groups engage. [92] Most recently, a prominent rape case resulting from the use of these militias is raising doubts about the wisdom of the policy. [93] It remains uncertain whether these militias will contribute to security or whether they will "reset" Afghanistan to the chaotic violence it experienced in the mid-1990s, when the militias were last operating without accountability.

A seemingly simple decision, like building a local militia or destroying a mine-laden village carries serious long-term consequences. These actions fundamentally alter the local balance of power, elevate new, unknown people to leadership, and contribute to the corruption and abuse of power that tends to drive Afghans into the arms of the Taliban. Yet, U.S. decision-making still seems focused on six- and twelve-month timeframes, and there is almost no planning for the consequences of these decisions.

Conclusion

These lessons we identify all overlap. Magical Thinking, the first and arguably most important lesson, underpins the subsequent four lessons. The botched reconstruction projects, the poorly planned militias, the inexplicable assumptions behind creating a children's television show in a country where most people don't have electricity – all of it is magical thinking.

These follies also demonstrate a fundamental failure on the part of US policymakers to grapple with and understand Afghanistan and how it functions. It also highlights the lack of long-term planning and success in the country.

At its most basic, the lesson we should really learn from Afghanistan is the need to constantly revisit one's assumptions.

In 2002, everyone assumed the country was safe and only needed reconstruction to return to normalcy again. By 2006, the Taliban was coming back, so policymakers assumed sending more troops into the mix would work. They made a similar assumption in 2009, though this time coupled with rhetoric about how counterinsurgency would fundamentally alter the overall strategy and policy.

None of the assumptions policymakers employed in planning for the war matched the reality of the war.

As a result, the Afghan war lurched from policy to policy without any strategic plan to ensure a long-term success.

This is where the 5th Lesson, Success Only Matters over the Long Term, applies. In designing a proper strategy, you must start with the desired end state and work backward from there to develop the means by which you arrive at that end state. There is no evidence that either the Bush or Obama administrations actually did that.

The war in Afghanistan has lacked a definable, achievable, measurable strategy from the moment the Taliban fled Kabul in 2001 to today.

Internalizing the lessons we draw out above – which requires employing good strategic planning and remaining flexible – will help policymakers mitigate the effects of past mistakes as this conflict winds down and avoid making these same errors in the next one.

The new Strategic Partnership Agreement, signed in May of 2012, outlines the US-Afghanistan relationship through 2024. It is an attempt to think about Afghanistan in the long term: a much welcome development. It is by thinking about Afghanistan in the long term, and making plans to match that long term focus, that policymakers can put into place programs that will support the country for the long term.

The SPA has some drawbacks.

It the ISAF coalition to fund and support the Afghan security forces but it does not say how. The Administration in 2013 will have to ask Congress for funding every year – and the same is true for each NATO member state.

There is no guarantee that this funding will continue, or that simply funding an Afghan military will result in a stable, Taliban-free government after a decade.

However, the SPA is a step in the right direction. It at least creates a longer time frame than 1-2 years, which is the period on which most planning for the war has taken place so far.

There remain significant challenges.

The US remains under-engaged with Afghanistan's politics – despite important elections coming up during the transition, there is almost no discussion about how different political outcomes will affect the transition strategy. Similarly, plans like the renewed push to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on the failed Kajaki dam project in Helmand province demonstrate a continued reliance on magical thinking while misunderstanding the environment.

That is why these lessons need to be learned.

Policymakers should not continue to make the same plans with the same faults with the same poor likelihood of success. Future plans should be definable and achievable, devoid of magical thinking but also made with an eye toward longterm success.

Despite the hopeful change the SPA marks in how the US is relating to Afghanistan, policymakers still desperately need to apply these lessons to the transition strategy and the future of US operations in the region.

Only by addressing these critical shortcomings can the strategy have any hope of success.

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