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Research Article

**THE US NATION-BUILDING AND DEMOCRATIZATION EFFORTS
IN AFGHANISTAN IN 2001-2021**

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon the relevant literature and declassified documents related to the US war in Afghanistan, the study investigates Washington's policy of nation-building and its imposition of a Western-style democracy on this war-ravaged nation. The results of the study have shown that despite its political, military and economic preponderance, the US failed to deliver a liberal democratic governance to the Afghan people. The US democratization efforts led to the establishment of a highly corrupt and incompetent puppet regime. The US tried to impose its political system on the country that has historically lacked a strong centralized government and where ethnic, tribal and regional identities and divisions have been deeply entrenched. Thus, the paper provides an in-depth analysis and discussion of American nation-building in Afghanistan, identifying and explaining the underlying reasons for the failures of its democratization efforts.

Keywords: US, Afghanistan, Taliban, Nation building, Democratization.

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INTRODUCTION

The study seeks to shed light on the US nation-building and democratization efforts in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. Throughout the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the United States has engaged in military interventions in numerous countries across the globe, with the intent of carrying out regime change to establish pro-Western and American-style quasi-democratic regimes through nation-building projects modeled upon the American political system. A key question is often raised in literature why the United States constantly seeks to deliver so-called democracy and liberal order to certain countries despite the unlikelihood of a desired outcome and relatively low prospects for success (Walker, 2019). This type of question has been posed by scholars who have conducted research on the rationale behind the US efforts to promote democracy abroad, and various studies have provided overlapping, differing, and sometimes conflicting perspectives on this specific matter. Yet, expressions like ‘bringing democracy’ might sound neutral; however, as literature indicates, in most cases, democracy is imposed upon a nation through violence and against the will of the local people. The export of democracy is largely a violent enterprise and process that entails the use of military force. A central element at the core of U.S. foreign policy is the concept of regime change, which has been a driving force behind American engagement in world politics. The war in Afghanistan is not a unique case; rather, it was one of the never-ending episodes of the ongoing cycle of violence and warfare in US history. From a historical perspective, the US emerged as a warfare nation. Therefore, war and violence have not only been at the core of its foreign policy but have been fundamental to American national identity.

In his statement made in August 2021, in relation to the US withdrawal and abandonment of Afghanistan, President Joe Biden highlighted how the US was involved in nation-building and did its best to engineer a highly centralized democratic regime in the country (Biden, 2021). Throughout the 20-year of American military occupation almost 800,000 Americans served in Afghanistan, to say nothing of military troops and administrative personnel provided by allies, as well as the staff of multiple international intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations, the expenditures, and costs of military occupation and of nation-building process exceeded \$2,3 trillion (Rubin, 2024). According to some estimates, the price of occupation was much higher. President Biden justified his decision to get out of Afghanistan by saying that the war and extending it to its third decade was no longer in the service of the vital national interest, and the underlying rationale for the American invasion in 2001 was to ensure that Afghanistan would never be used again to attack the US (Biden, 2021). In his speech on 16 August 2021 on the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, Biden rendered null and void the 20-year American strategy of nation-building and democratization of Afghanistan by saying: “I’ve argued for many years that our mission should be narrowly focused on counterterrorism, not counterinsurgency or nation building. Our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to be nation-building. It was never supposed to create a unified, centralized democracy. Our only vital national interest in Afghanistan remains today what it has always been: preventing a terrorist attack on the American homeland” (Biden, 2021).

Leading American diplomats and scholars have acknowledged the fact that the initial triumph in Afghanistan was subsequently overshadowed by missteps, mistakes, and conflicts on the ground that led to the failure and exit from Afghanistan (Gates, 2015). Premised on the belief that an enemy should never leverage Afghanistan to undermine the US national security, Washington and its allies, with the engagement of hundreds of agencies and NGOs, pursued the goal of installing a modern democratic regime in the midst of a protracted war. For that purpose, every year billions of American dollars were poured into Afghanistan, and throughout the US occupation regime, the country became one of the largest recipients of international aid. At the start of the military occupation, it was thought that the US troops would not stay in the country for long, as Washington's focus was about to shift to the Middle East, in particular to Iraq. The quick overthrow of the Taliban, although it was largely treated by the US as a decisive victory over the enemy, referring to Afghanistan in this specific case as a post-conflict context. This was a serious mistake. This was because the US attempts to democratize the country were ceaselessly and simultaneously accompanied by bloody war, which culminated in the Taliban takeover in 2021.

Even before the American invasion, Afghanistan had been a weak, fragmented, and failed state. Notwithstanding the state of being shakiness, disintegration, and fragility was not created by the Afghan nation itself. The weakness and fragility of the Afghan state were largely caused by the foreign interventions starting with the Soviet invasion and occupation that left the country in ruins entirely nullifying the achievements of the previous Royal and Republican governments in building a modern and democratic nation and dragging the country back to the medieval times. The Soviet occupation that pursued the goal of installing a communist regime in Afghanistan and keeping the country within the Soviet geopolitical sphere of influence, decimated the nation, giving rise to multiple belligerent groups who engaged in a power struggle. When the US invaded the country in 2001, Afghanistan had already been a failed state. As a result, the US undertook its nation-building project with the aim to build a more democratic and stable state in the post-Taliban Afghanistan (Whitlock, 2021).

Global war on terror initiated by the US and its allies was underpinned by the concept of regime change and democratization. Democratic peace theory suggests that the spread of democracy and emergence of democracies would ensure lasting peace, stability and security in the world. In this regard, the US policy was based on this theory. Although American nation-building and democratization in Germany, Italy, Japan and South Korea in the aftermath of WWII were quite successful, an attempt to install an American style democracy in Afghanistan did not yield the same outcomes. Literature indicates that the failure of American efforts to effectuate nation-building and democratization in Afghanistan can be attributed to the lack of a modern state in this country (Fukuyama, 2004: 101). Despite tremendous efforts of Afghan rulers, especially under the monarchy up to the 1970s to establish a modern centralized state in Afghanistan, the country had remained a tribal society with very limited state penetration and control (Fukuyama, 2004: 101). The subsequent Soviet occupation and a constant power struggle between different ethnic and tribal factions substantially undermined and decimated "everything that was left of that already weak state" (Fukuyama, 2004: 101). The Afghan case has clearly shown that Western concepts about democracy and regime change cannot always be extrapolated to

certain socio-political contexts such as Afghanistan. Moreover, the US experience in Afghanistan in 2001-2021 has demonstrated that the forced democratization policy and external imposition of a democracy does not always yield the expected results. Furthermore, the failure of the US in Afghanistan has indicated the limits and shortcomings of American power and democratic peace theory.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research paper draws upon literature and declassified documents regarding the US war efforts in Afghanistan. Additionally, to determine the theories that guided and underpinned the US regime change strategy and nation-building efforts in Afghanistan, this study examined the Democratic Peace Theory, which formed the conceptual framework of this research. To this day, numerous studies and declassified policy documents have been published. In particular, sensitive interview data collected by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), an oversight agency on Afghanistan reconstruction created by US Congress in 2008 (SIGAR, 2021), former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's short memos also known as "snowflakes" (Thomas, 2020; 2022), as well as a series of documents called "the Afghanistan Papers" published by "The Washington Post" in December 2019 that consist of notes and transcripts of interviews with high ranking US officials, diplomats, policymakers and military officers (Whitlock, 2019; 2021). Documents were released by the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives regarding various aspects of the US war in Afghanistan (Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2020).

To understand the US efforts to democratize Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, it is necessary to reveal and unpack the ideological and conceptual foundations of the American strategy of exporting democracy and the nation-building project that underpins the US policy aimed at regime change and establishing American-style regimes globally. Throughout its history, both the US domestic and foreign policy have been shaped and guided by moral principles and assumptions rooted in liberal democracy, market economy, freedom, and human rights. The spread of these key values abroad has been the backbone of American foreign policy and its engagement with the world. The rationale for exporting democracy abroad, if necessary, imposing it by force upon other state actors, is rooted in the belief that democracies tend not to go to war against each other (Russett, 1993).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the literature, nation-building is conceptualized and described from various perspectives, depending on historical circumstances and cultural and political contexts. Yet, from an American standpoint, nation-building refers to the use of military force as part of a foreign policy endeavor aimed at carrying out regime change and fostering political, institutional, and economic changes to transform an undemocratic context into a democratic one (Dobbins et al., 2007). Although building a new political regime in a post-conflict society can be referred to as rebuilding or reconstruction, most studies employ the term nation-building. In the aftermath of the overthrow of the Taliban, although Afghanistan could not be referred to as a post-conflict setting, nation-building efforts were undertaken amid chaos and war. Keane draws attention to the vagueness, ambiguity and even pejorative character of the term 'nation building' (Keane, 2016: 18). The

US engagement in nation-building in Asia and Europe after WWII, specifically steering Germany and Japan towards liberal-democratic constitutional orders through direct military occupation, external intervention, and delivering massive financial and technical aids, is indicated as a success that could be replicated elsewhere (Keane, 2016: 19). Yet despite certain commonalities between the post-WWII nation-building efforts in Germany and Japan on the one hand, and on the other, in Afghanistan in the aftermath of 2001, the latter stood in stark contrast to the former owing to its history of a weak fractured government, a fragmented country, deep divisions along the ethnic and regional lines (Keane, 2016: 20).

The prominent political scientist Deutsch (2017) notes that any sizable nation to be called a nation ought to meet the following essential preconditions: to be independent that refers to being sovereign, managing its internal and external affairs by itself and not to be ruled from outside; to be cohesive that refers to having a developed and internally unified society in which effective and varied social communication and cooperation with themselves and with outsiders are carried out; politically organized that involves the provision of a constituency for a government that executes effective rule within the realm of its jurisdiction; to be autonomous that entails granting consent, support and compliance to the government to make sure that its rule is efficient and effective; to be internally legitimate that suggests giving the support, consent and compliance to the government not only in times of peace but in times of adversity which guarantees its endurance and viability (Deutsch, 2017). Leveraging the concept of forced democracy interventions, Walker theorizes this concept as a desire and endeavor of the US to export its political system abroad and engineer political regimes in its image (Walker, 2019: 1). Inspired by the three successful democratic transformations in Japan, Italy and Germany in the aftermath of WWII, American policymakers have frequently been tempted to transform autocracies into a Western-style democracy around the globe (Walker, 2019: 2). Thus, democratization and nation-building under American watch between 2001 and 2021 was a top-down, externally imposed, coercive regime change policy. In this case, Walker refers to this policy as forced democracy, defining it as “an attempt by a liberal government ... to bring about democracy in an illiberal target state through military force” (Walker, 2019: 2).

Although few American scholars and officials opposed the idea that the US should take responsibility for Afghanistan’s further development and for rebuilding the country, the majority insisted that it would be irrational and foolish to disengage and desert Afghanistan. This group of pundits offered a rationale for further American engagement from various perspectives. In his seminal book “Afghanistan. A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban” Tanner (2002) refers to an unwise decision to abandon Afghanistan after the Soviet defeat in 1989. It suggests that this time the US ought not to make the same mistake because in this ever-shrinking world, even the most destitute and remote countries like Afghanistan may easily pose a grave threat to the international community. From this standpoint, the national security of the US can be put at risk due to imaginary risks and threats that may emerge elsewhere in the world at any time. Such narratives emanate from the painful 9/11 events and are reflected in rigid and biased conceptions and beliefs about the Muslim World and Afghanistan as a whole.

Another American pundit, Fukuyama (2004), contends that failed and weak states like Afghanistan may be taken over by destructive terrorist non-state actors, and they subsequently would turn them into an epicenter of global terrorist attacks. Fukuyama (2004) also highlights the possible scenario of the merger of radical Islamism with weapons of mass destruction, whose far-reaching, devastating impact would be felt and put the rest of the world at risk, including the US and other wealthy nations in the Global North. Fukuyama (2004) further stresses that, as conventional containment strategies are largely infeasible and irrelevant at this juncture for dealing with such non-state actors, the only solution lies in adopting a new security strategy premised on the concept of regime change. The American strategy of regime change is designed to intervene militarily and effect regime change in order to prevent similar threats from emerging in the long term. The maintenance of US national security and that of its allies, according to Fukuyama's logic, must be based on the doctrine of preemptive or preventive attack aimed at repelling perceived imminent threats. In the views of Saikal and Snider, the concept of democracy promotion underpinned and guided American policy towards the post-Taliban Afghanistan, in which the US policymakers and their Afghan allies saw building a democracy in the country as essential for regional and global security (Saikal, 2024: 74-75; Snider, 2022). Yet the forced democratization policy and the installation of a dysfunctional governance in Kabul ultimately eroded and shattered the American project in Afghanistan (Saikal, 2024: 74).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

American nation-building project after 2001

With the US invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban rule came to an end, and Washington embarked on nation-building and reconstruction efforts. Washington's endeavor to transform Afghanistan into an American-style liberal democracy was assisted by NATO allies, in the framework of the Global War on Terror and Operation Enduring Freedom. Other members of the international community assisted American efforts to install a democracy in Afghanistan. Studies highlight the fragility and failure of state-building efforts in Afghanistan throughout its history (Bizhan, 2018; Dodge, 2021; Ibrahim, 2024; Partaw, 2023). On the eve of the American invasion in late 2001, Afghanistan had been categorized as a failed state with a weak and fragmented government with no capacity to provide needed services and protection to its citizens (Bizhan, 2018). Due to the long-protracted war, internecine battles and constant struggle for power between various ethnic groups and political factions, the country was completely decimated, and millions of Afghans were uprooted. More than two-thirds of the population were violently displaced and had to flee the country, mostly to Pakistan and Iran (Bizhan, 2018). In this regard, the immediate tasks of the international community led by the US were to restore order, stabilize the country, engineer nation-building processes with the intent to erect a viable economy, a legitimate and efficient government.

With the post-WWII successes in Germany and Japan in mind, the US and many other state and non-state actors were engaged in nation-building in war-torn Afghanistan with the aim of transforming the country into a democracy. Perhaps the most perceptible feature of the US nation-building efforts in Afghanistan was its strong military presence in this country, which made nation-building an ex-

ternally imposed coercive measure (Keane, 2016: 26). To make nation-building efforts effective, tenable and sustainable, a stable security environment ought to be established, which Afghanistan lacked not only in the pre-2001 period, but also throughout the American military occupation era (Keane, 2016: 26). In this case, nation-building pursues a swift transition from a state of internal chaos to a comprehensive civic and political order (Keane, 2016: 26). In his first presidential State of the Union Address on 29 January 2002, George W. Bush stated that “America and Afghanistan are now allies against terror. We’ll be partners in rebuilding that country. This evening, we welcome the distinguished interim leader of a liberated Afghanistan: Chairman Hamid Karzai... Today, women are free and are part of Afghanistan’s new government” (Bush, 2002). One year later, during his second State of the Union Address on 28 January 2003, Bush boasted: “In Afghanistan, we helped to liberate an oppressed people, and we will continue helping them secure their country, rebuild their society, and educate all their children” (Bush, 2003).

In the 2004 State of the Union Address, Bush drew attention to the global mission of the US to spread democracy: “America is a nation with a mission, and that mission comes from our most basic beliefs. We have no desire to dominate, no ambitions of empire. Our aim is a democratic peace ... we will finish the historic work of democracy in Afghanistan and Iraq, so those nations can light the way for others” (Bush, 2004). Hamid Karzai, an American-backed president of Afghanistan, envisioned his nation after the fall of the Taliban as a modern state predicated upon Islamic values and based on justice, rule of law, freedom and human rights (White House, 2002). Richard Boucher, who served as a high-ranking official in the Bush administration in charge of South Asia, said in his 2015 interview that the bottom line of the US nation-building policy in Afghanistan was to leave behind a more functional and effective government that would deliver a good governance to its citizens and would not harbor any enemies of the US (Boucher, 2015). Referring to this policy as an American “exit strategy” or a “government à la Washington”, Boucher outlined the US policy in relation to Afghanistan as building a stable government, which would follow in the footsteps of the US by holding democratic elections, respecting women’s rights, delivering essential services and protection to its citizens (Boucher, 2015).

In the aftermath of 9/11, the United States activated its policy of regime change and forced democratization of Afghanistan. According to Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs at Brown University, the US spent \$2,26 trillion in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, lion’s share of which distributed to the central Afghan government as well as private contractors and nongovernmental bodies (NGOs) who were in charge of implementing various aspects of nation-building and democratization of the country (Partaw, 2023). American policymakers and experts displayed their optimism about the progress of democratization in Afghanistan, emphasizing the establishment and functioning of all attributes of a democratic society, such as the presidency, the law-making body and a democratic system (Partaw, 2023). Yet despite such optimism, the nation-building process and democratization in Afghanistan turned out to be untenable due to the failure of the US and its Afghan allies to maintain national security throughout the country. Although the US succeeded in toppling the Taliban regime in late 2001, the Taliban went underground and kept resisting the American occupation and its puppet government in Kabul.

Exclusion of the Taliban from nation-building process

The same foe that was despised, toppled and banished in 2001 with the American invasion and was believed to have ceased to exist, emerged from the ashes, and launched assaults against the US and the Afghan forces, which had debilitating effects. The Taliban was initially viewed as a terrorist organization. Yet as a result of fierce resistance to the American occupation and the puppet regime, the Taliban gradually started to earn respect from its foes and proved its worth. Many scholars and politicians argue that because of Washington's rigid stance towards Afghanistan, throughout the American occupation regime, there were lots of missed chances and opportunities, missteps and blunders, errors and miscalculations made by Washington. One of such blunders was treating the Taliban as a terrorist group, utterly rejecting the idea of seeking to shrink the differences with the Taliban. The US refused to engage the Taliban in the intra-Afghan dialogue and accommodate the interests of all feuding Afghan factions and find a common ground that would likely bring the country long-awaited peace and stability.

That however, did not happen first and foremost due to the American dogmatic and unyielding position, its perception of the Taliban as an evil force. That being so, the Taliban was not involved in the Bonn conference of Afghan leaders in December 2001, nor was it part of the nation-building process spearheaded and overseen by the US. In this regard, Whitlock argues that the exclusion of the Taliban from the 2001 Bonn agreement was a fatal mistake (Whitlock, 2021: 35). Rubin points out that despite the initial eagerness and readiness of Taliban leaders to cooperate with the US, American policymakers equated the Taliban with al-Qaeda and attempted to eradicate this movement (Rubin, 2024). Echoing Whitlock, Rubin contends that the US missed the opportunity for establishing political stability and security due to its obstinacy to cooperate with the Taliban (Rubin, 2024). When Washington started to be convinced that the shaky and untenable regime in Kabul was not capable of taking care of itself and was not a match against the Taliban, the US understood that the war had become meaningless and had reached its stalemate. As the war was leading nowhere but only to an impasse, it eventually prompted a paradigm shift in the American discourse towards the Taliban from perceiving it as an evil terrorist faction to viewing it as an insurgency. In terms of understanding and conceptualization of terrorism and insurgency, both are assigned negative connotations and entail the use of violence for political purposes. While the former is overwhelmingly viewed as a pejorative notion to be employed to denigrate, vilify, and stigmatize the enemy, insurgency bears legitimacy owing to its connection with terms such as liberation and freedom fighters.

The genesis of paradigm shifts in discourses and attitudes towards the Taliban induced the US to consider it not as a terrorist organization, but as an insurgency and part of the ongoing conflict. The war in Afghanistan began to be perceived as an internal conflict and civil war among various Afghan belligerent factions. It took almost nine years for the US to reconsider and reassess the situation in Afghanistan and its attitude toward the Taliban, which first occurred during the first term of Barack Obama's presidency. It was inevitable that the US was forced to accept the reality that the Taliban was an adversary whose efforts were guided by the desire to drive the Americans out of the country and oust the puppet regime in Kabul and return to power.

The US under the George W. Bush administration maintained its rigid policy towards the Taliban and Afghanistan. Barack Obama's rise to power in 2009 heralded a shift and change in the US policy towards Afghanistan. In November 2010, the Obama administration made the first serious attempts to start negotiations with the Taliban, in which the US offered its foe a place in Afghan politics and a power-sharing structure. The Obama administration expressed its willingness to relax its tough stance on the Taliban and confer legitimacy on it. However, the negotiations came to an end when the insurgency group rejected the offer to engage with the Afghan government in Kabul, considering it to be illegitimate and an American puppet regime (Coll & Entous, 2021).

The failure of nation-building and democratization in Afghanistan

When the US picked up Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun tribal leader and CIA asset, as the head of the Afghan Interim Administration, he and his government possessed no real authority and resources (Whitlock, 2021: 24). Reminiscing about his visit to the president's palace in Kabul with Secretary of State Colin Powell in January 2002, Richard Boucher pointed out that "There was no money ... no foreign reserves, no gold and none of what you would expect. Most of the ministries didn't have a telephone" (Boucher, 2015). Despite spending \$143 billion for reconstruction, aid programs and national security forces from 2001 to 2020, the US engineered a corrupt and highly dysfunctional puppet regime, whose further survival entirely depended upon the American military presence (Whitlock, 2021: 39).

The root cause of the failure of the external top-down nation-building and democratization in Afghanistan lay in the inability of the US and its allies to defeat the Taliban and ensure national security. While the setback for ensuring peace, security and stability was the key cause of the American failure in Afghanistan, there were other underlying reasons for the ultimate collapse of the American grand project of democratization. In Ibrahim's view, the shortcomings in five major areas, such as welfare, state authority, rule of law, political regime and political community, undermined and eventually reduced to nothing the nation-building and democratization efforts under the American watch from 2001 to 2021 (Ibrahim, 2024). Policy documents and studies indicate a variety of causes of American blunders and failures in Afghanistan during its military occupation. Saikal draws attention to the dysfunctional, incompetent and ineffective governance throughout the American presence in the country, both under Hamid Karzai in 2001-2014 and under Ashraf Ghani in 2014-2021 (Saikal, 2024: 102). As Karzai and his governance proved to be incompetent and ineffective, he had to work closely with Zalmay Khalilzad, American presidential envoy and ambassador to Afghanistan (Saikal, 2024: 104). Ashraf Ghani, Karzai's successor, despite his Western education and experience, mimicked his predecessors, exhibiting authoritarian tendencies, and preferring ethnic Pashtuns in the government, which led to ethnocentrism (Murtazashvili, 2022). Ghani's systematic crackdown on commanders and warlord governors of non-Pashtun ethnic background led to the fall of districts in the north to the Taliban. According to Murtazashvili (2022), by early 2021, the Afghan government had controlled only 30% of the country.

Policy data released by various American state agencies regarding the American reconstruction of Afghanistan have highlighted key underlying causes for the ineffectiveness of the American project of nation-building and democratization. The Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), established in 2008 as the American government's primary oversight agency for Afghanistan reconstruction, conducted hundreds of interviews with leading American policymakers, military personnel, and other stakeholders involved in the reconstruction effort, and analyzed thousands of documents produced by the US government and its agencies. As a result of extensive research over many years, SIGAR identified several reasons for American failure in Afghanistan (SIGAR, 2021). According to SIGAR, during the entire 20-year American presence in Afghanistan, the US government and its agencies, such as the Department of State, the Department of Defense and other government bodies, lacked a clear vision and consistently struggled to develop and put into practice a coherent and sound strategy (SIGAR, 2021). In fact, virtually all government agencies lacked the necessary mindset, a proper understanding of the contextual factors, and the expertise and resources required for developing a sound strategy to rebuild the country. The initial American strategy to defeat the Taliban turned out to be untenable as the enemy, which went underground, transformed itself into an insurgent group. Due to the resistance of the Taliban across the country, the US struggled to maintain security and stability, which in turn considerably eroded its reconstruction efforts. Furthermore, endemic corruption within the country and the Afghan government undermined US policy. This made the Afghan government in Kabul illegitimate and incompetent in the eyes of Afghans and the Taliban. Therefore, its survival depended on the American military might (SIGAR, 2021).

SIGAR established that the US government set unrealistic goals and underestimated its capacity to effectively implement programs (SIGAR, 2021). As a result, a great number of the institutions and infrastructure projects built by the US became unsustainable. Moreover, the US government lacked human resources both military and civilian personnel to effectively carry out its programs. Even if there were enough personnel, they appeared to be unqualified and incompetent. Due to an acute shortage of qualified personnel, civilian agencies such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID) could not perform their tasks meaningfully (SIGAR, 2021). Furthermore, American nation-building and democratization were increasingly marred by constant insecurity and rampant violence across the country. Despite the US dominance and military superiority, Afghanistan remained a contested area by the Taliban and other factions, who systematically challenged and undermined the US reconstruction efforts (SIGAR, 2021). According to SIGAR, American reconstruction efforts were severely undermined by the lack of understanding and knowledge of the Afghan context and failure to tailor nation-building policy to contextual factors (SIGAR, 2021). Due to the lack of an in-depth and proper understanding of the context they were operating in, the US agencies, officials, personnel and other stakeholders imposed American models onto Afghanistan. Besides, the lack of background knowledge compelled Americans and their allies to rely on local powerbrokers, warlords and other influential actors, who tended to take advantage of their privileges granted by the US by abusing their power and enriching themselves at the expense of ordinary Afghans (SIGAR, 2021). In his 2015 interview to SIGAR, Richard Boucher, Assistant Secretary of State for South

and Central Asian Affairs, stated that “We did not know what we were doing... maybe everybody should have had to read a little more history ... to operate in Afghanistan” (Boucher, 2015).

SIGAR also highlighted the weakness and unsustainability of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), which was considered instrumental in the US policy in the country and a key precondition for American policy of transition of security to the Afghan government and its eventual exit (SIGAR, 2017). Although the US invested heavily in creating, training and equipping the ANDSF, after American withdrawal, the Afghan army and security forces were unable to maintain stability in the country. The US military presence and its investment in building an Afghan army and police force failed to reduce violence across the country (Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2020). It was established that the US government overestimated its ability to ensure stability and build government institutions (SIGAR, 2018). The large sums of money that were poured into stabilization efforts by the US eventually led to the expansion of conflicts, encouraged corruption and boosted support for the Taliban and other insurgent groups (SIGAR, 2018). The US and its allies struggled to neutralize and defeat insurgents. As a result, certain areas of the country were under the control of insurgents. SIGAR’s investigation revealed that corruption was a strategic threat to the American mission and its democratization efforts (SIGAR, 2016). Ryan Crocker, the US ambassador to Afghanistan in 2011-2012, pointed out that “the ultimate point of failure for our efforts ... wasn’t an insurgency. It was the weight of endemic corruption” (SIGAR, 2016). SIGAR stressed the US contribution to the expansion of corruption in Afghanistan by pouring billions of dollars, partnering with powerbrokers and warlords, and encouraging the growth of corrupt patronage networks (SIGAR, 2016). In April 2013, citing an anonymous American official, “The New York Times” reported that the US was the largest source of corruption in Afghanistan (Rosenberg, 2013). In January 2020, the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives reported that all financial resources that the US had been injecting in Afghanistan were wasted and stolen (Committee on Foreign Affairs, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the US nation-building efforts and their attempts to introduce an American-style democracy to Afghanistan. However, it has been revealed that despite possessing enormous military capabilities and strengths, the United States ended up losing the longest war in American history and being forced to abandon Afghanistan. In the light of the 9/11 attacks on American soil, deeply obsessed and preoccupied with getting revenge and bringing those who committed a crime against America to justice, the Bush administration invaded and militarily occupied a war-torn and impoverished Afghanistan. The rationale behind the invasion was that the Taliban regime harbored and provided a safe haven for Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. The US and its allies, backed by the international community, overcame the Taliban’s resistance without much effort and toppled the regime. After such a dazzling triumph, the US should have disengaged itself from Afghanistan. Yet instead of following the reason, the Bush administration initiated its nation-building project, endeavoring to transform Afghanistan into an American-style democracy, which eventually came at a high price. Due to such a blunder, the US got trapped in Afghanistan for 20 years, sinking deeper into a quagmire, resulting in the American defeat. The American

defeat in Afghanistan resembled the catastrophe in Vietnam. There are many reasons that contributed to this outcome. Yet, the current study argues that one of the principal causes of US failure is its involvement in the nation-building process in Afghanistan without sufficient knowledge of local conditions.

Critical analyses of policy documents and relevant studies have highlighted that imposing democracy and engineering nation-building with the goal of transforming a nation into a Western-style democracy do not necessarily yield the desired outcomes. The US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was justified by its attempts to defeat and eradicate al-Qaeda. Yet one of the biggest mistakes made by the US was its conflation of the Taliban with al-Qaeda, which excluded any opportunity to create a new stable Afghanistan. Studies call attention to the exclusion of the Taliban from the nation-building process as one of the American blunders and even as a fatal mistake. A lack of knowledge and an in-depth understanding of the Afghan context became one of the key reasons leading to the defeat and exit of the US from Afghanistan. Policy documents and studies emphasize that due to the lack of understanding of Afghanistan, Americans failed to develop and implement far-reaching, effective and sustainable programs. A lack of knowledge about the Afghan context led the US to impose its political system and institutions on the country, which had historically lacked a strong central government. As a country, Afghanistan has historically been divided along ethnic, tribal and regional lines. Moreover, strong ethnic, tribal and regional identities and affiliations have traditionally hindered any efforts to create a centralized state. With little knowledge and understanding of the Afghan context, the US hoped to transform the country into a democracy.

Yet due to the contextual constraints and limitations, the US was unable to deliver liberal democratic governance to Afghanistan. Throughout the American military occupation period, the US and its allies were not able to eradicate the Taliban and ensure stability and security. Insurgent groups openly defied the American military dominance and undermined its nation-building policy and democratization efforts. Moreover, the Afghan government, created and backed by the US, failed to earn legitimacy in Afghan society and remained a pro-American puppet regime whose survival was contingent upon the US. Studies and Western media have documented that the root cause of the American failure in Afghanistan was the US itself. The US was seen as the biggest source of corruption and decay in Afghanistan. Pouring billions of dollars into Afghan society, the US engineered and bolstered a highly corrupt regime with wide corrupt networks involving the US agencies, officials, military, powerbrokers, Afghan officials, local warlords, NGOs and other actors. Despite the huge investment in the Afghan government and an Afghan army, the US and its allies never established full control over the country. The Taliban and other insurgent groups controlled certain areas of the country and even expanded their influence. As a result, the 20 years of American nation-building and democratization efforts ended in complete failure. The Taliban's comeback and takeover in August 2021 put an end to the American presence in Afghanistan and prompted the collapse of its puppet regime in Kabul. This, in turn, shows again that Afghanistan is indeed the graveyard of empires.

Ethical Commission Approval

This study did not require approval from an ethics committee as it did not involve human participants, animals, or sensitive personal data. All data used in this research were obtained from publicly available sources.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

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