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What the US can learn from the war in Afghanistan
and why it matters in the era of near-peer competition

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Introduction

After nearly twenty years of military involvement in Afghanistan, the US and its allies withdrew from the country in August 2021. The Taliban quickly returned to power. The departure of US troops from Afghanistan has been followed by a pivot in focus away from irregular warfare toward preparation for a confrontation with its competitors, China, and Russia. Despite this pivot, lessons from Afghanistan remain relevant because competition with Beijing and Moscow has and will continue to feature irregular warfare.

This paper will analyse the merits and shortcomings of the US's approach to Afghanistan and highlight why Washington must conduct further reflection even as near-peer foes appear to be the most pressing threat to its national security. The paper will first explain why learning from irregular wars is necessary. Next, it will describe how two of Washington's foremost near-peer enemies, Russia, and China, have historically used irregular tactics to highlight the need for a continued focus on irregular warfare. Finally, it will address the relevance of the Afghanistan lessons to Washington as it faces threats from Russia and China in the present day.

Before such an investigation is made, however, several key terms need to be defined. First, I define a near-peer competitor as an adversary with similar yet marginally weaker capabilities relative to the US and capable of challenging Washington in all domains of conflict—air, land, maritime, and cyberspace.¹ The two most important near-peer adversaries the US faces today are Russia and China.² Next, irregular warfare is a struggle among state and non-state actors to “influence populations and affect legitimacy”.³ Finally, counterinsurgency (COIN) is defined as military, paramilitary,

political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat an insurgency, which is an organised movement aimed at overthrowing a government through subversion and armed conflict.⁴

The US tends to perceive irregular wars as aberrances from conventional conflicts and thus deprioritises the importance of learning from irregular conflicts, choosing instead to refocus its attention and resources on conventional war. This proclivity to view irregular wars as exceptional events has led the US to enter irregular conflicts—Afghanistan included—unprepared. After the war in Vietnam, for instance, the US military purged itself of the knowledge and resources it used to fight the irregular conflict with the attitude that such things must be forgotten because they pertained to how the war was lost.⁵ In the years after Vietnam, the US army disbanded the majority of its civil affairs units and reduced the number of foreign affairs officers or experts in political-military affairs within a given region.

Special Forces (SF) pivoted away from COIN and towards supporting conventional forces, and the United States Agency for International Development cut its global staff by 83%.⁵ The failure to learn from Vietnam and the ensuing pivot away from irregular warfare resulted in the US being unprepared for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. With the war in Afghanistan over and the US now once again pivoting to countering near-peer competitors, Washington risks making similar errors by not learning from its mistakes and not institutionalising the knowledge gained during years of involvement in the country.⁶ Such a mistake could result in the US not only being unprepared for future irregular wars but also for conflicts with near-peer enemies utilising irregular tactics, costing unnecessary time, resources, and human lives, resources, and



time. Consequently, the US must study its successes and failures in Afghanistan to perform better in future irregular conflicts.

The list of American successes in Afghanistan is not long but merits discussion. The US toppled the Taliban in a matter of months following the 9/11 attacks using just several hundred personnel comprising special operations troops and intelligence officers. Army SF teams deployed deep into enemy territory, linked up with the Northern Alliance, a military alliance opposing the Taliban's rule, and conducted a series of lethal offensives against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 574, for instance, consisted of just twelve men who called in close air support (CAS) on the Taliban, destroying vehicles, key command posts, troop concentrations, and anti-aircraft artillery pieces. ODA 574's work helped local warlords, which facilitated General Abdul Rashid Dostum to assume power and gave the US a foothold and airport in northern Afghanistan. Similarly, during Operation Rhino on 19-20 October 2001, two hundred Army Rangers seized a Taliban-controlled airstrip, gathered intelligence, established a forward aerial refuel/rearm point for aircraft involved in a raid against Leader of the Taliban Mullah Omar's compound, and laid the groundwork for a Marine base to be constructed. Another SF team was inserted into north-eastern Afghanistan roughly fifty miles from the capital city of Kabul on the night of 19-20 October. The team met up with two Northern Alliance commanders and called in CAS against the Taliban for over three weeks, degrading the Taliban and al-Qaeda's hold on the area, killing hundreds of enemy troops, and disrupting enemy support elements. With a severely weakened enemy, the Northern Alliance leaders were able to conquer Kabul in just one day despite estimates predicting it to take five days. By early December of the

same year, the US embassy in Kabul reopened.⁷ The success of the early days of US operations in Afghanistan displayed the strength of Washington's counterterrorism abilities. With a clearly defined mission, and a relatively small number of troops supported by US airpower and the Northern Alliance, the US displaced the Taliban and decimated al-Qaeda in a matter of months.⁸ However, as the scope of the US mission in Afghanistan grew to include COIN and state-building and the number of American troops in the country rose, the war became more complex and less winnable.

As the scope of the US mission in Afghanistan broadened, Washington struggled to create a coherent and lasting strategy guiding its presence in the country. This lack of focus posed a significant obstacle to success. Washington's ever-changing strategy has led some to regard the war in Afghanistan not as one twenty-year-long war but as twenty one-year long wars.⁹ The initial counterterrorism mission against al-Qaeda and the Taliban was followed by a shift toward COIN and state-building, steps seen as necessary to prevent the resurgence of al-Qaeda. Consequently, the US attempted to rebuild Afghanistan's institutions, infrastructure, and economy in the name of keeping al-Qaeda out.¹⁰ The US's ever-changing objectives and enemies led it to adopt a short-term outlook on its mission in Afghanistan that signalled to the Taliban that it could win by outlasting the US. Had Washington been more patient and showed a willingness to remain involved in Afghanistan as long as necessary, the Taliban would have been more likely to agree to a political settlement as they would have understood that the alternative was a permanent military stalemate.

The US's impatience drove excessive, rapid spending on the war and rebuilding



Afghanistan fuelling corruption and complacency within the Afghan government. Washington's short-term goals had to be met with short-term timelines, and as security deteriorated, the pressure to show progress rose. With minimal progress on the ground being made, US officials attempted to signal progress by spending more. The rate of expenditures exceeded the rate at which Washington could account for its spending, delegitimising the Afghan government and fuelling corruption and insecurity. US funding also exceeded the country's absorptive capacity—the amount of aid a state can receive before significant economic, social, and political disruptions occur—for a decade. Additionally, because the Afghan government was reliant on the US for revenue instead of its citizens, Kabul was not accountable to its people and was thus unresponsive to their needs. According to estimates by the US Government Accountability Office, donors paid for roughly 90% of Afghanistan's public expenditures in the early 2010s, meaning the Afghan government charged its population for only about 10% of its expenditures.¹¹ US aid also altered Afghan power structures. Diverting and stealing US aid intended to reach ordinary Afghans, political elites profited from the US war effort. The elites often ran the government for personal gain and committed crimes with impunity in what became a sort of mafia rule. Afghans became frustrated with growing corruption, and some turned to the Taliban, which presented itself as an enemy of corruption, to address their woes.¹²

The US mission in Afghanistan was further challenged by its lack of understanding of the country. Succeeding in counterinsurgency requires a deep understanding of local contexts that the US rarely had in Afghanistan. The US suffered from a shortage of linguists, undermining its

ability to communicate with Afghans. A 2020 report published by the Council on Foreign Relations found that the State Department had more Albanian speakers than both Farsi and Dari (Afghanistan's official languages) language speakers combined.¹³ In October 2001, one month after 9/11, the National Security Education Program, which is tasked with training foreign language and culture specialists for the US government, had trained just four students in Farsi and none in Pashto, compared to seventy-two in Arabic.¹⁴ Short deployments to Afghanistan further undermined Washington's ability to build expertise in the country. Conventional troops typically spent anywhere from six to twelve months in the country and special operators just several months, a period too short to build an understanding of their respective areas of operations. According to counterinsurgency expert Seth Jones, an optimal deployment would have lasted two years and included six months of language instruction.¹⁵ American diplomats were in the country for a similarly brief period, with the US embassy suffering a 90% annual turnover of personnel.¹⁶

Washington's lack of knowledge about Afghanistan resulted in avoidable mistakes being made. The US often implemented projects that inadvertently helped one party while harming another, creating an opportunity for insurgents to align with the disaffected party. COIN tactics such as cordons and searches, airstrikes, and population control also clashed with Pashtunwali principles guiding many Afghans lives.¹⁷

In addition, the US did not understand Afghan tribal governance either. It perceived Afghanistan as an ungoverned land when, in reality, most of Afghanistan was governed by tribal orders—non-state-centric forms of control that reject other belief systems



introduced by outsiders. While the foremost unit of social organisation in a state is the nation, the predominant unit in a tribal order is the tribe. Afghanistan's tribal orders predate the imposition of a Westphalian state in the country. The primacy of the tribe meant that any political solution violating tribal sovereignty in Afghanistan was bound to face popular opposition.

Indeed, Washington's attempts toward imposing a Western-style legal framework in the country were not productive. Between 2003 and 2015, the US spent over \$1 billion on rule of law programming but failed to effect change because the system it wanted to implement was foreign to most Afghans, who settled 80 to 90% of civil disputes at the community level. The Taliban exploited Afghan's distaste for Western-style governance by providing an appearance of security and justice through their style of conflict resolution. Competing with the legitimacy of the Taliban's system of conflict resolution would have meant allowing sharia law, a political impossibility for the US.

In sum, the US's poor understanding of Afghan languages, culture, and tribal orders hindered its ability to wage a successful counterinsurgency.

One of the most key factors in a successful counterinsurgency is training indigenous forces and giving them primacy over security-related matters. According to COIN expert Seth Jones, counterinsurgencies in which indigenous governments have competent security forces win two-thirds of the time, while governments without competent security forces win less than one-third of the time. During the war in Afghanistan, indigenous forces never developed the competency required to defeat the insurgency and fight corruption and crime. The Afghan National Army (ANA)

lacked local air support, was under-resourced, and was dependent on US forces. Many soldiers had too little ammunition and body armour and numerous units had no mortars, few machine guns and MK-19 grenade machine guns, and no artillery. The ANA also lacked helicopter and fixed-wing transport and attack aircraft. Its lack of resources severely impacted its ability to conduct operations against well-equipped Taliban forces.

The ANA also lacked adequate training. While ANA recruits initially had to undergo 14 weeks of training, as the targeted size of the army grew, the duration of training decreased to just 10 weeks by 2007. Up to 90% of recruits were illiterate, and a considerable proportion had problems with drugs and alcohol. Illiteracy bred a wide range of problems, especially in the administrative and logistical units.¹⁸

The ANA also suffered from poor morale. Afghan soldiers often went absent without leave, driving attrition during the ANA's early days in 2002-2003 to 40 per cent and causing annual turnover to hover around 25% throughout the US's involvement.

Consequently, by 2009, just over one-third of ANA units were able to operate independently. Under-resourced, poorly trained, illiterate, and with low morale, the ANA never reached the level of combat effectiveness required to defeat the Taliban.

Likewise, the Afghan National Police (ANP) never attained a level of competence necessary to fight crime in the country. Local police forces play an even more essential role than armies in determining the outcome of a counterinsurgency, and the ANP was the least competent branch of Afghan security forces. The US and its allies failed to adequately train and mentor the ANP,



squandering an important opportunity to boost domestic security.

In the beginning, Germany was responsible for training the ANP. However, its program was underfunded, slow, and produced too few officers. American officials grew impatient with the German approach and took over ANP training in 2005. The US training program, however, faced its own challenges and particularly suffered from a lack of personnel. In 2009, Washington projected a need for 635 Police Mentoring teams but had enough personnel to sustain just ninety teams, and many of those teams were understaffed.

DynCorp, a contractor hired by the US to train the ANP, also lacked competence. While some of its police trainers had extensive experience in training foreign police, many others had little to no experience. Some police advisors, for instance, were helicopter pilots and received minimal training in policing and many advisors received training that was unspecific to Afghanistan, a country, as mentioned earlier, with a unique way of governance unfamiliar to many westerners. To compensate for their lack of instruction, some advisors desperately turned to television shows such as “Cops” and “NCIS” in hopes of becoming familiar with policing. In addition, the US assigned Navy SEALs, who specialise in direct action, instead of Army Special Forces, whose mission is to train foreign security forces, to train Afghan Local Police.

Consequently, US Special Operations Forces struggled to build a competent indigenous police force. New ANP officers were given little mentoring after finishing formal training. With just several weeks of training under their belt, ANP officers were sent into villages with no oversight or assistance. Such

a lack of mentoring resulted in the ANP growing susceptible to the influence of warlords and tribal leaders. Its officers often took bribes in exchange for allowing drugs and illicit goods to pass along through their area of operations. A 2015 report published by the US Department of State found that the ANPs were undertrained, predatory, and unaware of their duties and defendants' rights under the law. The report also found that the ANP routinely engaged in torture and abuse. The ANP's incompetence and overstepping of boundaries alienated Afghans and undermined Washington's goal of increasing Afghan security. Building a competent police force would have been a crucial milestone in combating the insurgency, illicit drug trade, warlords, and organised crime in Afghanistan. The US failed to develop effective police training and mentoring programs, missing an opportunity to develop the most important security force in a counterinsurgency. This failure, paired with Washington's inability to train a competent Afghan army presented a major setback to the US campaign. Lacking competent indigenous forces, insecurity was bound to spike after the US withdrawal in August of 2021.

While the US gleaned these lessons from fighting non-state actors including the al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the knowledge gained from those years is still relevant as Washington refocuses on countering near-peer foes in Beijing and Moscow. It is a misconception to believe that these states will use conventional tactics against the US. Rather, near-peer competitors have and will utilise irregular tactics against the US.

The People's Republic of China was forged by Mao's insurgency against the Kuomintang (KMT), or Chinese nationalists. Mao considered guerrilla operations not to be an independent form of warfare but as just one step in any war.¹⁹ China today is conducting



a maritime insurgency in South China and Coral Seas. Beijing has organised a network of fishing vessels into a maritime militia, complicating the battlespace and its adversaries' decision-making processes as civilian vessels are protected under the law of naval warfare. Any fishing vessels destroyed by an adversary such as the US would provide China with an argument that the US used violence against non-military vessels.²⁰ Beijing has also launched information, influence, and funding campaigns targeting the KMT and the Chinese-identifying Taiwanese population, and it lures Taiwanese citizens to study and work in mainland China, imposing a brain drain on Taiwan. These activities demonstrate Beijing's willingness and ability to use irregular tactics to its advantage, highlighting the continued relevance of the lessons from the US's experience with irregular warfare in Afghanistan as it pivots toward countering China.

Russia is another near-peer competitor with strong irregular capabilities and a history of using irregular warfare to achieve its aims. Russia is famed for its hybrid warfare model in which it utilises subversion and economic, information, and diplomatic activities in addition to military force to achieve its goals.²¹ Before invading Georgia, for instance, Russia waged an aggressive information campaign to sow chaos and confusion within the country and about Georgia among its allies. Moscow spun a false narrative claiming Georgia was acting aggressively against small nations and that its government was guilty of genocide against the Abkhazian and Ossetian people.²² More recently, Russia used troops without insignia to lend deniability to its 2014 invasion of Ukraine. Moscow also imposed punitive economic measures including import bans and sanctions against individuals to inflict costs on the Ukrainian regime, contributing

to a near 50% loss of GDP between 2013 and 2015.²³ In the information space, Moscow uses Ukrainian television channels owned by Russian allies and trolls and bots on social media to sow distrust and instability within the country. Indeed, in the days preceding the invasion, Russia promoted false stories, amplified unverified videos, and portrayed Ukraine as a pro-Nazi country to control the media narrative.²⁴ The strength of Moscow's hybrid warfare model highlights the need for a continued focus on irregular warfare in Washington even as the US moves past the war in Afghanistan.

Washington must learn from its failure to devise a clear and lasting strategy in Afghanistan and commit to a coherent strategy vis-à-vis Beijing and Moscow. The US cannot devise a strategy on a year-to-year basis as it did in Afghanistan if it wants to stand a chance against its near-peer foes. Unlike its illiberal rivals that lack serious domestic political competitors and can thus devise strategy spanning decades into the future, US strategy is revised every four to eight years as presidential administrations change. The National Security Council changes between presidential administrations, adapting to each president's decision-making style.²⁵ In contrast, Chinese President Xi Jinping has charted his country's path out to 2049, by which time he wants China to be a global leader in all competition spaces and to have achieved complete unification with Taiwan, Macao, and Hong Kong.²⁶ Russia similarly benefits from having a coherent, resilient foreign policy strategy determined by President Vladimir Putin. During his twenty years in power, Putin has steadfastly pursued Russian unity, a return to great power status, and preventing NATO from expanding further east into Europe.²⁷ While China and Russia have the ability to commit to long-term goals, the US has displayed a lack of commitment to its



foreign policy objectives including those in Afghanistan and struggled to even label Russia as a threat under the Trump administration.²⁸ While a consensus has emerged in Washington regarding the Chinese threat to American interests, policymakers have yet to reach a consensus on how to pursue great power competition with Beijing.²⁹ The US must commit to a coherent and lasting strategy similar to its Cold War containment policy to defeat its near-peer competitors. Washington must also exercise patience, something that it lacked in Afghanistan. It took over forty years of commitment to containment before the Soviet Union collapsed. Outlasting its near-peer competitors in the twenty-first century will similarly likely be a decades-long undertaking. Washington must thus devise and commit to a strategy that can survive between presidential administrations and span years into the future.

In Afghanistan, the US lacked the linguistic and cultural knowledge necessary to wage an effective counterinsurgency. Competing with near-peer competitors will likewise require the US to have a corps of linguists and area specialists that can provide insight into the political, cultural, and societal characteristics of each respective competitor. The US currently lacks an adequate number of Russia and China experts. While there are between 300-400 million Chinese citizens fluent in English, there are only 35 million Americans fluent in Mandarin.³⁰ While English is a compulsory subject for Chinese students beginning from age eight, and roughly half a million Chinese citizens are studying in English-language universities at any given time,³¹ a 2017 report revealed that just 400,000 American schoolchildren were enrolled in Mandarin classes.³² While the number of American high school students studying Chinese is growing, with the number of those sitting the Advanced

Placement (AP) Chinese exam more than doubling between 2010 and 2020, still, twelve times as many students sat the AP Spanish exam in 2020. As tensions rise between Washington and Beijing, the US's lack of Mandarin speakers will hamper its ability to compete with China and thus threaten American national security.

The US is likewise confronted with a dearth of Russia specialists as a consequence of its post-Cold War pivot toward the Middle East and reduced for foreign language instruction at universities and exchange programs. Funding for the Title VI program, which allocates money for foreign language programs in the US, for instance, was cut by forty per cent in 2011.³³ Funding for Title VIII, which grants students money to learn languages through studying abroad similarly suffered cuts throughout the early 2000s and received no funding for the 2013-2014 fiscal year. Title VIII director Lynda Park said that the spending cuts show short-sightedness on behalf of the US government as nearly every Russia expert had benefited from the program's funding over the past several decades.³⁴ The number of students at institutions of higher education studying Russian also dropped 17.8% between 2009 and 2013 and 7.4% between 2013-2016, reflecting insufficient funding and Washington's pivot away from Russia and towards threats in the Middle East. The pivot away from Russia, according to former National Security Advisor to President Carter Zbigniew Brzezinski, cost it much-needed Russia experts and resulted in the US losing its understanding of the "darker side" of Russian politics and history.³⁵ The cost of Washington's loss of its historical memory of Russia has already been borne. Intelligence officials warned in 2015 that Washington's depth of knowledge and capacity to collect intelligence on Russia fell short of what is required to counter the Russian threat,



pointing at American failures to anticipate Russia's moves in Ukraine and Syria.³⁶

In sum, the US lacks the area and linguistic expertise crucial to defeating its near-peer competitors in Beijing and Moscow. Washington must take steps to bolster its corps of linguists and area experts if it wants to remain ahead of its foes.

In addition, the US must learn from the mistakes it made in training the ANA and ANP to build more well-prepared indigenous forces in Ukraine. The Russian invasion of Ukraine presents the US with a unique opportunity to continue to provide training and arms to Ukrainian security forces and to train Ukrainian civilians to wage an insurgency to raise the costs of Russia's occupation. The US has provided roughly \$2.5 billion in military aid to Ukraine since 2014³⁷ and nearly two hundred American National Guard troops and an undisclosed number of special operators have been stationed there to train the Ukrainian military as part of a regular rotation that began in 2015.³⁸ While the US has provided Kyiv with arms including crucial anti-tank javelin missiles and other military aid, it has not yet—at least overtly—trained the substantial number of Ukrainian citizens aspiring to resist the Russian occupation.³⁹ A poll conducted in late 2021 showed that 39% of Ukrainian men would resist a Russian invasion with weapons in hand.⁴⁰ The US could play a leading role in training Ukrainian civilians to wage an insurgency against the Russian occupying forces. A well-trained insurgency would provide Ukraine with an asymmetric advantage against Moscow and thus raise the costs of Russia's occupation and make the Kremlin reassess whether the benefits of occupying Ukraine outweigh the costs.

The US has a similar opportunity to deter Chinese aggression against Taiwan by preparing the island's security forces to defend against a potential invasion. As the threat of a Chinese invasion looms, training and arming the Taiwanese military could decrease the likelihood of a Chinese invasion while allowing Washington to remain committed to its policy of strategic ambiguity. According to a testimony made by retired US Navy Admiral Philip Davidson to the Senate in April 2021, annexing Taiwan is one of Beijing's top priorities and something that could happen within five years.⁴¹ The Taiwanese military is not prepared to defend against an invasion. Its armed forces are significantly understaffed. An early 2021 report found that frontline units were being manned at just 60% strength.⁴² Even when adequately staffed, Taiwanese are not adequately trained. A piece published by the *Wall Street Journal* last fall reported low-quality basic training and a common unwillingness among Taiwanese troops to defend the island.⁴³ One soldier said his basic training consisted mainly of raking leaves, moving spare tires, and pulling weeds.⁴³ Taiwan's armed forces also lack sufficient funding. Taipei spends just \$11.5 million per year on defence, an amount similar to that of Singapore, which has a similar population size but does not face the existential threat posed to Taiwan by China.⁴⁴ Washington consequently has an opportunity to strengthen Taiwan's military readiness and to build a deterrent against a Chinese invasion by training and arming the Taiwanese military. Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen confirmed last fall that US Marines and special operators had been training with Taiwanese troops since 2020. Continuing and expanding upon such training initiatives with Taiwan's military would strengthen Taipei's deterrent against Beijing and help Washington remain ahead of its Chinese competition.



As Washington moves past Afghanistan and refocuses on near-peer competition, it risks forgetting the lessons it learned during its near two-decades-long involvement in the country. Failing to learn from Afghanistan and focusing too heavily on conventional warfare in hopes of countering China and Russia could prove costly for Washington because irregular warfare will likely continue to feature heavily in future confrontations with Beijing and Moscow.



Notes

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