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Political Science 20: World Politics

22 November 2021

Final Analysis Paper

With over two decades of a sustained presence in Afghanistan, the United States made several attempts to faithfully resolve and reshape Afghanistan to hinder it from acting as a breeding ground for transnationalist terrorism. Early on during the war, the United States hastily exhausted the Taliban's resolve, bringing their power and presence in Afghanistan to near extinction. This, however, did not last as the US bailed on Afghanistan and invaded Iraq, which acted as the tipping domino in a chain of events that resulted in the now known downfall of the US effort in Afghanistan. The United States invading Iraq and involving itself in other issues thinned its forces out in the Middle East leading to commitment problems and the loss of their upper hand with Afghanistan. Instead of having inconsistent and shifting policies in that region, the United States should have focused on Afghanistan, while the Taliban was weakened. They should have first increased security while disarming Afghanistan to preempt the Taliban and to help aid the development of the lacking modern infrastructure like the Ring Road. Moreover, the United States should have taken more control over Afghanistan until it could clearly be seen that the newly formed democratic government could sustain itself and prevent further insurgent and terrorist movements from prospering in Afghani soil.

The United States was destined to use nation building tactics, regardless of if the term was used, to bring fruition to Afghanistan. Nation building is a drastic undertaking that involves the lives and time of many individuals along with an exuberant number of resources. According

to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Policy Brief from May of 2003, nation building can be grouped into four distinct categories: security, internal characteristics of the country, multilateralism, and lastly, effort. During the US effort in Afghanistan multilateralism occurred at a high degree as various nations, though not as much as the US, aided and supported the effort. The other three categories relating to the aforementioned policy changes can be put in question regarding to which extent they were effectively addressed. Moreover, to understand whether committing to the policy changes that are mentioned in the introduction would have made a difference, one can look at the United State's past attempts with nation building such as with Japan after World War II.

Japan

After the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan was occupied by the allied powers. Immediately, war ingrained Japan was demilitarized and disarmed, preventing an uprising and easing the job of securing the country for the influx of American troops. By securing Japan and preempting a future uprising, while also changing fundamental ideologies, Japan was able to flourish and modernize. Further, with the help of well managed aid, Japan became the nation it is today. Using what was learned in Japan, a positive future for Afghanistan could have also seen light.

Returning to Afghanistan: Securing and Developing

During the first two years of the occupation of Afghanistan, the United States quickly removed the ruling Taliban government, and began switching gears toward nation building and developing the country. One major development project was the reconstruction of the Ring Road. The Ring Road was built by the Soviet Union but had been destroyed as a result of decades of war. Rebuilding it would connect a majority of Afghanistan's major urban centers with the

intention to advance and stimulate commerce and trade. This would help perpetuate one of the pillars of nation building: expansion of trade and economy. Moreover, the road would increase the reach of the new Afghani government, stabilizing their rule, while also benefiting the lives of everyday civilians. Civilians, especially rural citizens, would gain easier access to healthcare while businesses would be able to reach more people, stimulating the economy. However, this effort was stalled by the US shift in focus in the Middle East.

In 2003, the Bush Administration chose to invade Iraq, making Afghanistan a second priority as they had believed they accomplished a majority of their goals within Afghanistan. This was one of the first mistakes during the war, and this steep decline in forces and effort acted as one of the first commitment problems. The US was losing its credibility, making it easier for the Taliban to recoup and regain their resolve (Azizian, 2021).

Furthermore, the declination in force unsecured Afghanistan, inhibiting the US effort to rebuild Afghanistan. According to the Rand Corporation, Afghanistan faced several security threats such as “residual Taliban and al Qaeda elements ... [and] ... general banditry and lawlessness” (Rand Corporation 130). These two threats garnered strength and power during the Iraq War, and hindered the development of Afghanistan especially when it came to the Ring Road. Moreover, with the demise of US forces, security for construction crews and the road was hampered. According to Larry Walker, the president of a consulting group managing a part of the Ring Road, “[t]he degraded security environment has made this the most dangerous project [his] company has attempted” (Larry Walker). Construction crews were forced to hire expensive security, which only skyrocketed the costs more. Moreover, with the majority of power and responsibility being in the hands of the weak and corrupt Afghani government meant that the billions of dollars being poured in were not being allocated properly. To address this issue, the

United States should have kept the status quo while slowly increasing security and defense as needed to stabilize the area around the construction to keep crews safe. They should have also, like in Japan, continued to seize full oversight of the country while using the newly formed government as a tool to spread influence and stability. With Japan, the United States did not begin to hand back power to the native rulers until Japan had stabilized and begun to thrive. Therefore, the US should not have begun reducing its influence in Afghanistan until Afghanistan's economy stabilizes and grows solely with the momentum of the Afghan people and Afghanistan's government is able to secure the country on its own. Lastly, by maintaining a stronghold in Afghanistan, the US would also preempt the Taliban and Al Qaeda from gaining an opening to return.

Benefits and Change in Policy by not Invading Iraq

Counterterrorism in the United States has been based on the wrong ideas for the past two decades. This incorrect conclusion to why terrorism occurs can be partially attributed to various political figures including President Bush. In Former President Bush's address to the nation on September 20th, 2001, the former president said "On September the 11th, enemies of freedom committed an act of war against our country", which only propagated this misconception further. However, the reason for terrorism stemming from the Middle East can be attributed to the "political grievances and competition for power in the Middle East" (Thrall and Goepner, "*CATO Institute*"). A majority of Middle Eastern terrorist acts committed in the United States can be thought of as coercive tactics done by terrorists. For example, in 2010, Faisal Shahzad, who attempted to set off a bomb in Times Square, stated in his court hearing "I want to plead guilty 100 times because unless the United States pulls out of Afghanistan and Iraq, until they stop drone strikes in Somalia, Pakistan and Yemen and stop attacking Muslim lands, we will

attack the United States and be out to get them,” which incenuates that US involvement in the affairs of the Middle East perpetuates terrorism in the US.

Therefore, one can argue that the United States should not have involved itself in Afghanistan at all; however, this conclusion can only be made with the power of hindsight. The initiative to invade Afghanistan was almost a consensus among nations, with only one congresswomen, Barbra Lee, voting against it (Brockell, Washington Post). In other words, even if not invading Afghanistan would have been a better choice, the likelihood that that conclusion would have been reached back then was close to none. However, information regarding the consequences of US involvement in Afghanistan began to formulate prior to the invasion of Iraq, and hence, the United States should have changed its ideology and reasoning behind the motives of terrorists by simply not invading Iraq while in Afghanistan (Thrall and Goepner, “*CATO Institute*”). Invading Iraq only further accentuated anti-US sentiment, creating more political grievances, which only made it difficult for the United States in Afghanistan. Moreover, the process of nation building is dependent on the internal characteristics of the nation. In regards to Japan, the Japanese did show resentment and resistance to US forces. But with the process of developing Japan, and with the help of the emperor, the United States was able to mitigate the political grievances the Japanese had. That only made the reconstruction efforts simpler. With Afghanistan, though the population was factionized, not invading Iraq would have prevented a faction from being created between the Afghans and the United States. Further, it could already be said that the Afghans were becoming more supportive of the US initiatives similar to the Japanese, as various groups of people who were initially disadvantaged under Taliban rule, such as women, gained access to new and modern rights and experiences. Hence, by focussing on

Afghanistan, the United States would have also been able to minimize some of the internal resentment characteristics.

Counter Arguments

Now, if the US had maintained and steadily increased its presence in Afghanistan, another question of whether a security dilemma would have been formed comes into play. The answer to that is yes, but this security dilemma began on the day the US stepped foot on Afghani soil. As the US began to remove the Taliban forces, these forces had no other choice but to arm and recruit more people to fight on their behalf. To mitigate this, the US should have put more effort into properly disarming Afghanistan. Afghanistan has been enriched in a wartime culture, as it has been an active war zone for over 30 years prior to the US invasion. Hence, upon US arrival, the United States attempted to execute four disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs (DDR). However, all four of these efforts failed. According to the United States Institute of Peace, western powers used DDR programs to create short-term political or security while instantly rearming other groups, which fed more arms into a country that didn't need more (Derksen, 2015). Relying on the weak and corrupt Afghani government to protect the nation only created larger political and ethnic factions. Instead, as stated before, the United States should have increased its security and defence position while disarming the nation, like Japan. That is until the Afghani government stabilized and could militarize on its own. In addition to that, maintaining a strong presence would have prevented the Taliban and Al Qaeda from having the chance to rise again as their progress had been essentially stagnant while the US held control (Azizian, 2021).

Conclusion

Ultimately, the United States during the Bush Administration should have committed to fully securing Afghanistan to develop and modernize it without withdrawing or decreasing effort until a stable governing institution arose. The United States saw the light at the end of the tunnel, and they handed the wheel to the Afghanistan government, spinning the US initiative in Afghanistan out of their hands. Instead of being inconsistent with foreign policies and efforts in the Middle East, the United States should have focused on Afghanistan to further prevent political grievances from being formed. Moreover, they should have sought to not create more commitment problems with Afghanistan as commitment problems act as a sign of weakness that the enemy can prey on. Maintaining effort and commitment to Afghanistan by increasing defense and security would have boosted the pillars of nation building, elevating Afghanistan to a new level instead of repelling it backwards. The time the US would have to spend in Afghanistan and the tremendous number of Afghani and US lives that would have to be lost by maintaining a high degree of security can not be known, but the chance of successfully rebuilding Afghanistan would have been higher. However, any chance of improvement would undoubtedly outweigh the costs during the last 20 years, which tragically led to no change, and if anything, more political distress.

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