



NATO's Engagement in Afghanistan: Assessment and Implications

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ABSTRACT

NATO was established in 1949 when the USA, Canada, and ten European states signed the North Atlantic Treaty. The treaty emphasized protecting the security of NATO members, primarily Western European countries, from threats posed by the Soviet Union. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, NATO adopted a strategy of expansion, believing that increasing its membership would improve its effectiveness in safeguarding European security.

NATO also recognized the significance of non-traditional threats such as instability, and terrorism outside its borders, which could potentially threaten the security of its members. As a result, NATO expanded its security concept to encompass political, economic, social, and environmental factors. Consequently, NATO began to address these new threats emerging outside the European continent, such as illegal immigration, counter-terrorism, and peacekeeping operations.

NATO's involvement in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014 marked the Alliance's first deployment outside Europe and its longest war to date. The mission ended with NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 after failing to achieve its objective of building a Western-style democratic state. However, NATO maintained a training and advisory mission until withdrawing it in 2021.

My study aims to analyse the factors that led to NATO's failure in its mission in Afghanistan and its impact on the Alliance's willingness to undertake new missions outside Europe.

KEYWORDS: NATO, Afghanistan, Taliban, security studies, ISAF, United Nations, Europe, Soviet Union, USA.

Introduction

NATO was established in 1949 after the USA, Canada, and 10 European countries signed the North Atlantic Treaty, which emphasized the protection of the security of NATO members. NATO worked primarily to protect Western European countries from the threats posed by the Soviet Union.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the bipolar international order changed, and NATO adopted a strategy of expansion, considering that increasing the number of its members would increase its effectiveness and ability to perform its tasks and protect European security, then the number of NATO members reached by the year 2020 to 30 countries after North Macedonia joined the alliance¹.

NATO has also adopted an expanded concept of security that recognizes the importance of political, economic, social, and environmental factors and considers that instability, the spread of terrorism, and human rights violations outside NATO borders can directly threaten the security of NATO members², thus NATO began to engage in confronting the new non-traditional threats emerging on the global stage outside the European continent. Such as illegal immigration and counter-terrorism, peacekeeping operations³.

NATO's involvement in Afghanistan (2001-2014) is the Alliance's first deployment outside Europe and the longest

war in its history. This mission ended with NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, despite its failure to achieve its goal of building a Western-style democratic state. Otherwise, NATO maintained a training and advisory mission and later withdrew it in 2021.

My study aims to analyze the factors of NATO's failure in its mission in Afghanistan and its impact on NATO's willingness to re-engage in new missions outside Europe.

The beginning of NATO's involvement in Afghanistan (2001-2003)

The day after the attacks of 11 September 2001, NATO member states decided to activate Article 5 of the Treaty on the Collective Defense Clause, as they considered it to apply to attacks on American land⁴.

In light of the Taliban's refusal to hand over the leader of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden to Washington, the USA did not wait for NATO contributions, which usually suffered from many caveats and operational restrictions⁵. President George W. Bush announced on 7 October 2001 the beginning of air raids and attacks in Afghanistan as part of a military operation called "Enduring Freedom" within a coalition that included several states such as Britain and Canada. Bush said that this operation aims to prevent the use of Afghanistan as a base for terrorist operations against the USA and destroy the military capability of the Taliban that was ruling Afghanistan at that time⁶.

¹ - Aaron Mehta, North Macedonia to officially join NATO on Friday, Defense news, 25 March 2020.

<https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2020/03/24/north-macedonia-expected-to-join-nato-within-days/>

² - Murat Aslan, NATO in peace support operations: efficiency of intelligence and propaganda in Bosnia Herzegovina and Afghanistan. (Ph.D. Doctoral program: Middle East Technical University, 2017), p.24.

<http://etd.lib.metu.edu.tr/upload/12620987/index.pdf>

³ - The Strategic Concept for the Defense and Security of The Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, 2010, <http://www.nato.int/hisbon2010/strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf>.

<https://ijbassnet.com/>

⁴ - NATO and Afghanistan, NATO, 7 December 2021. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8189.htm.

⁵ - Andrew R. Hoehn, Sarah Harting, Risking NATO: Testing the Limits of the Alliance in Afghanistan, (RAND Corporation: 2010): 16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/m974af>.

⁶ - George W. Bush, Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan Address to the Nation, 7 October 2001.

<https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/George%20W.%20Bush%20%20Operation%20Enduring%20Freedom.pdf>

<http://dx.doi.org/10.33642/ijbass.v9n4p4>



On 14 November 2001, the Security Council called in its Resolution 1378 the UN to play a central role in establishing a transitional administration to govern Afghanistan, it also called for sending peacekeeping forces to Afghanistan after that in December 2001, an international conference was held in Bonn, Germany, under the auspices of the UN and in the presence of representatives of the Afghan factions opposed to the Taliban movement. The participants signed the "Bonn Agreement" which assigned the adoption of a transitional period ranging from two to three years, ending with holding elections in which Afghans choose the government that represents them. Indeed, the Afghan Interim Authority was established on 22 December 2001, headed by Hamid Karzai.

The Bonn Agreement also called for the deployment of an international security force to maintain security in the capital Kabul and stipulated that, when necessary, ISAF could be expanded to include other areas. Accordingly, in December 2001 the Security Council issued Resolution No. 1386, which authorized the establishment of an international security assistance force for 6 months to assist the Afghan Interim Authority in maintaining security in the capital, Kabul, and its surrounding areas. The UK agreed to lead this force during the first period of its mandate, and 17 other countries agreed to participate in it. The force's deployment began in January 2002 under the command of British Major General John McCall, and its number was about 4800 soldiers⁷. After 6 months, the Turkish forces took over the command of ISAF from the UK on 20 June 2002⁸.

Since achieving stability in any state requires unified government forces that can impose security within a legal framework that has legitimacy in the population's eyes, the international coalition forces have worked to establish Afghan government forces that include the army, police, border guards, and intelligence. On 1 December 2002, Afghan President Karzai issued a decree stating:

1- Laying the foundations for the new Afghan army, which is targeted to have a size of 70,000 soldiers distributed among five corps, including a central corps in Kabul and four regional corps in Kandahar, Gardez, Herat, and Mazar Sharif, with the expectation that the formation of the central corp in Kabul will take a period ranging from five to seven years⁹.

2-Dissolving all armed groups, which requires the demobilization of nearly 100,000 armed men, and the reintegration of most of them into society, to permit the presence of weapons in the hands of government forces only.

This plan faced several challenges, such as:

- The absence of a previous structure for a unified Afghan army, as the Afghan army collapsed during the era of the Soviet invasion.
- Providing the necessary funding to build the Afghan armed forces, whether to pay the salaries of individuals or to finance training operations, building military headquarters and bases, and armament.
- Setting appropriate criteria for recruitment considering that the illiteracy rate in Afghanistan reached 73% at that time among men¹⁰, and also considering the ethnic diversity in Afghanistan to avoid ethnic conflicts with the new army, especially with the international coalition forces relying mainly on local allies of the Tajiks and Uzbeks while most of Taliban fighters are Pashtuns who represent the largest ethnicity in Afghanistan.
- The dependence of the coalition forces on local allies of warlords, some of whom refused to admit the decisions of the Kabul government in appointing government officials in their areas of influence.
- The difficulty of dismantling the existing militias and armed groups and demobilizing their members in light of the deteriorating security situation in the country. Those who surrender their weapons may find themselves facing a state of chaos that pushes them to arm again.
- The presence of armed groups opposed to the new government that has combat experience and societal influence, such as the Taliban movement and fighters of the Islamic party led by Hekmatyar.

The initial output of the training programs for Afghan forces by the international forces was disappointing. The first three new battalions that graduated from the training courses suffered from a shortage of recruits, as only half of the required number were in each battalion. They also faced a lack of armament and difficulties in finding suitable barracks that were appropriate for the tasks required of them to achieve¹¹.

Also, the number of Afghan police forces numbers was planned to reach 20,000 personnel by 2004¹². Germany undertook the rehabilitation process but it faced many challenges as police forces have a weak level of personnel in light of the spread of illiteracy, a severe shortage of equipment, and the inability to carry out tasks in most parts of Afghanistan.

In the face of these challenges, the international coalition forces began in December 2002 to deploy provincial reconstruction teams to help the Kazai government extend its

⁷ - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (18 March 2002):

9, <https://undocs.org/S/2002/278>.

⁸ - Ibid, 5.

⁹ - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (26 November 2004):

7, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2004/925>.

<https://ijbassnet.com/>

¹⁰ - Afghanistan: Low literacy rates static for 20 years, Relief web, 7 Jun 2001, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-low-literacy-rates-static-20-years>.

¹¹ - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (21 October 2002):

4, <https://undocs.org/S/2002/1173>.

¹² - "Report of the Security Council mission to Afghanistan, 31 October to 7 November 2003", (11 November 2003)

:6, <https://undocs.org/S/2003/1074>.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.33642/ijbass.v9n4p4>



control over the country and build government structures¹³. Those teams consisted of military forces and civilian experts. New Zealand oversaw the leadership of the reconstruction team in Bamyan, and the UK deployed two reconstruction teams in Mazar Sharif¹⁴. But these teams did not work within a comprehensive vision in light of the subordination of each team to a different country, and they faced various conditions in their workplace as Northern Afghanistan was calm compared to the East and South.

With the approaching date of Germany and the Netherlands taking over ISAF leadership from Turkey in February 2003, the two states requested NATO to support ISAF in planning, air transport, logistical support, communications, and intelligence. NATO agreed to the request in October 2002¹⁵.

In 2003, the USA invaded Iraq, and soon the escalation of attacks against the American army began, the conflict turned into an irregular war, which forced Washington to reduce its commitments in Afghanistan to address the deteriorating situation in Iraq¹⁶. In conjunction with the American preoccupation in Iraq, the change of the state that leads the ISAF every 6 months has become a load¹⁷, as well as the desire of European states that rejected the USA invasion of Iraq, such as France and Germany, to absorb tension with Washington and provide a helping hand in another war. A pact was agreed on 16 April 2003 that NATO would undertake the leadership of the ISAF starting from August 2003 with the end of the rotation period of the German-Dutch leadership of ISAF¹⁸. This was the first deployment of NATO outside Europe.

NATO Command ISAF (2003-2014)

The escalation of armed attacks in eastern and southern Afghanistan contributed to prompting the Security Council on 13 October 2003 to pass a resolution to expand ISAF's missions outside Kabul to help in consolidating the authority of the Afghan government, establish stable government structures and institutions, force former warlords and militia leaders to acquiesce in government authority and demobilize their forces, and provide training and support to the Afghan police and army.

The first deployment of ISAF outside Kabul took place through the deployment of a German reconstruction team in Kunduz, northern Afghanistan in January 2004¹⁹. At that time, there were 11 provincial reconstruction teams in Afghanistan, 10 of them within Operation Enduring Freedom, which operates under the supervision of the US Central Command "Centcom" and one team under the supervision of ISAF, which follows the NATO commander, who also leads the American European Command, it means that there were two forces in the same arena, each of them following a different command²⁰.

In light of the relatively calm situation in western Afghanistan, ISAF established the Regional Command for the Western Region in May 2005 under the command of Italy, becoming its first regional command in Afghanistan. Then, in July 2006, ISAF took over the regional command in southern Afghanistan from "Enduring Freedom" forces. In October 2006, ISAF took over the leadership of the international forces in eastern Afghanistan to become responsible for security throughout Afghanistan while the international coalition forces operating within Operation Enduring Freedom remained close to counter-terrorism missions. With the increase in ISAF missions, the size of ISAF forces increased by January 2007 to reach 35,460 soldiers from 37 countries²¹.

NATO organized its military structures based on fighting in Europe, thus Afghanistan, as an Asian country with no seaports, presented a major logistical challenge for NATO in the transit of troops, equipment, and supplies. That situation forced NATO to deal with Pakistan, Russia, and Central Asian countries to secure logistical support for its forces in Afghanistan. NATO also prepared its forces to engage in Afghanistan in peacekeeping missions and help rehabilitate Afghan government forces, not to fight in a protracted counterinsurgency war. The Taliban attacks began to increase in 2005, which witnessed 17 suicide accidents, while only five suicide accidents happened from 2001 to 2004²². Then the situation worsened, and the rate of armed attacks rose in August 2008 to 983 accidents registering the biggest number since the beginning of the war in 2001²³.

| Year | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 |
|---------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Average monthly accidents | 425 | 566 | 741 | 960 |

The average number of monthly accidents in Afghanistan according to data reported in (The Situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and Security

ISAF faced problems in building effective Afghan security forces in parallel with the heavy losses that compelled many members of the Afghan army and police to escape to save their lives. To address this issue, ISAF has strengthened its forces to have by the end of 2008, 26 provincial reconstruction teams and

individuals from 26 NATO members and 14 from NATO partners with a total of 51,350 soldiers²⁴. ISAF forces were stationed mainly in the volatile areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan.

¹³ - Security Council, 18 March 2002, p.5.

¹⁴ - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (3 December 2003): (9-10), <https://undocs.org/en/a/58/616>.

¹⁵ - Ian Black, "NATO Emerges from Bunker with New Role in Afghanistan," The Guardian, 15 November 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/15/afghanistan.nato>

¹⁶ - Seth A. Johnston, "NATO's Lessons". The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters, vol 49, no. 3 (2019):16, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol49/iss3/4/>

¹⁷ - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (19 March 2004): 11. <https://undocs.org/S/2004/230>

¹⁸ - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (23 July 2003): 12-13. <https://undocs.org/S/2003/754>

¹⁹ - Security Council, 13 December 2003: 10.

²⁰ - Andrew R. Hoehn, Sarah Harting, 29.

²¹ - ISAF Key Fact and Figures Placemat, NATO, (29 January 2007): 2. https://www.nato.int/isaf/placemats_archive/2007-01-29-ISAF-Placemat.pdf

²² - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (7 March 2006): 10. <https://undocs.org/en/S/2006/145>

²³ - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (23 September 2008): 5. <https://undocs.org/en/S/2008/617>

²⁴ - ISAF Key Fact and Figures Placemat, NATO, 1 December 2008, p.2. https://www.nato.int/isaf/placemats_archive/2008-12-01-ISAF-Placemat.pdf



The chain of the military command of the ISAF was characterized by fragmentation and diversity, as each country participating in ISAF had a military representative present in Kabul who could object to the decisions issued by the NATO commander in Afghanistan for the forces of his country. Consequently, operational constraints emerged, such as not allowing the deployment of troops from certain countries in hot spots²⁵. For example, the NATO field commander could not order the Italian forces deployed in western Afghanistan to move helicopters or soldiers to support the British troops deployed in the south if they engaged in fighting.

Also, the rules of engagement of ISAF forces differed from one country to another. The Dutch troops worked according to a peacekeeping approach, not a counterinsurgency approach, which imposes to restrict their firing to the exposure of their elements to attack, and refrained from carrying out raids against Taliban elements. This approach reduces the ability of ISAF forces to operate within Dutch areas of responsibility to carry out offensive operations²⁶. Germany also refused to transfer its troops from the quiet northern region to hot regions, also German helicopters were only authorized to transport German troops. Those caveats created a degree of confusion among the ISAF forces²⁷. The adoption of English as the primary language in most areas of operations in Afghanistan has also resulted in poor communication and coordination with non-English speaking ISAF members²⁸.

To overcome the pluralism of military command, in September 2008 the commander of ISAF forces, US General David McKiernan, took command of the US non-ISAF forces in Afghanistan²⁹, and McKiernan issued two tactical directives aimed at reducing the number of civilian casualties and gave Afghan forces a vital role in planning and implementation Operations, particularly house inspections and arrests, as part of a scheme aimed at adopting a counterinsurgency approach focused on protecting the population rather than targeting insurgents.

By 2009, ISAF members began to re-evaluate the scene in light of the different battlefields in Afghanistan from one region to another, so a new approach was adopted that focused on economic development in the north and west which was characterized by relative stability at that time, focusing on strengthening the capabilities of the Afghan army and security forces in the south and east in light of the expansion of Taliban attacks in these regions.

In light of reflections on the financial crisis that burst in 2008 and continuing bleeding of human losses in ISAF forces, thinking began to gradually transfer security tasks to the Afghan forces and withdraw ISAF from Afghanistan. It was believed that

there was no military solution to the crisis in Afghanistan. President Karzai announced that negotiating with the Taliban would be his priority after winning the presidential election in 2009. But in return, the Taliban intensified their attacks, and the rate of attacks in May 2009 reached 1,000 accidents per month³⁰. In 2010 alone, 600 coalition forces were killed, including 400 American soldiers and 90 British soldiers³¹.

Before the decision to withdraw, ISAF reinforced its forces to support the Afghan security forces, bringing its size by the end of 2010 to 130,930 soldiers from 48 countries³². They also decided to increase the size of the Afghan army to 195,000 soldiers and increase the size of the Afghan police from 134,000 to 157,000, but this did not reflect NATO's desire to continue fighting but rather aimed to prepare the ground for the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The foreign ministers of NATO member states agreed in April 2010 to gradually transfer security responsibilities from ISAF to the Afghan security forces to take over all security responsibilities by 2014. The withdrawal decision was approved by the NATO Summit held in Lisbon in 2010³³. The Netherlands also announced the withdrawal of its forces in 2010³⁴. Karzai welcomed these decisions and demanded the continuity of the international community's support for his government. In March and November 2011, Karzai approved the areas included in the transition process in the first and second stages within a scheme that included the transfer of security tasks according to four stages.

Despite the deterioration of the security situation, the participants at the NATO summit held in Chicago in 2012 confirmed their commitment to the timetable to reduce the size of international forces and pledged to support Afghan security forces with 4.1 billion dollars annually³⁵. Then, NATO defense ministers agreed during their meeting in Brussels in October 2012 to start planning training missions in Afghanistan in post-2014³⁶. This decision confirmed that NATO's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan was not motivated by a tangible improvement in the security situation or a noticeable change in the military balance against the Taliban. The withdrawal decision sent a message that NATO no longer had the will to continue the war in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, the Taliban focused their attacks on checkpoints and bases handed over by ISAF to Afghan security forces. The Taliban also intensified the use of its personnel within the government forces to launch attacks on ISAF forces. The year 2012 alone witnessed 14 accidents in this way, pushing ISAF personnel to be fearful of the Afghan soldiers³⁷. The rate of attacks in Afghanistan in 2013 numbered 20093 accidents³⁸.

²⁵ - Michael G. Waltz. "Warrior Diplomat: A Green Beret's Battles from Washington to Afghanistan". (Potomac Books: the University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 237.

²⁶ - Johnathon Saltusuk. "NATO and the Afghanistan Mission: Lessons for the Alliance". (Thesis: University of Manitoba, 2012), 8.

²⁷ - Michael G. Waltz. (237-240).

²⁸ - Johnathon Saltusuk, 29.

²⁹ - Security Council, 23 September 2008, p.7.

³⁰ - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (23 June 2009): 5, <https://undocs.org/S/2009/323>.

³¹ - Andrew R. Hoehn, Sarah Harting, 38.

³² - ISAF Key Fact and Figures Placemat, Nato, 15 November 2010, p.3 : https://www.nato.int/isaf/placemats_archive/2010-11-15-ISAF-Placemat.pdf.

³³ - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (10 December 2010): 19, <https://undocs.org/S/2010/630>.

³⁴ - Patrick Keler. "Arguing Afghanistan: What the Detractors of NATO'S Mission Get Wrong." NATO Defense College, (2009), 7. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10259>.

³⁵ - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (20 June 2012): 4, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2012/462>.

³⁶ - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (6 December 2012): 4, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2012/907>.

³⁷ - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (6 December 2013): 5, <https://undocs.org/S/2013/721>.

³⁸ - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (7 March 2014): 4, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2014/163>.



Resolute Support Mission (2015-2021)

The NATO summit held in Wales in 2014 approved the establishment of a training mission in Afghanistan to help support the capabilities of Afghan security institutions. Then, the day after Ashraf Ghani assumed the presidency on 30 September 2014, the Afghan government signed a bilateral security agreement with the USA rather than an agreement with NATO that provided the legal framework for continued international military assistance beyond 2014 through NATO's Resolute Support Mission. By 31 December 2014, the mission of ISAF had ended, although the year 2014 witnessed 22,051 accidents with the second-highest rates since the beginning of the war in 2001³⁹.

NATO embarked on its new non-combat mission beginning in 2015, which aimed to provide training, advice, and logistical support to the Afghan security forces which had 350,000 soldiers. The size of forces contributing to the "Resolute Support Mission" at its beginning was 13,199 soldiers from 42 countries⁴⁰.

The US decision to withdraw was followed by a decline in US civilian support efforts for the Afghan government, as well as a decline in US training and assistance efforts for Afghan security forces despite the Afghan government's dependence in performing its work on foreign aid, which amounted to 80% of its income.

In 2014, deep divisions emerged between Afghan political leaders over the results of the presidential elections. On the other hand, the Taliban escalated its pressure against the government security forces. In October 2015 Taliban took control of the city of Kunduz the first capital of a province seized by it in 2001⁴¹. Taliban has also intensified the rate and scope of its attacks to be active in northern and western Afghanistan.

NATO summit held in 2016 in Warsaw adopted that the Afghan government would bear financial responsibility for its security forces by 2024. President Obama pledged to keep 8,400 USA soldiers in Afghanistan, authorized new rules of engagement that allow for more direct support to the Afghan security forces, and increased the use of airstrikes.

ISAF and Afghan security forces have tried to activate many tactics to counter the expansion of the Taliban. By 2017, the Afghan government decided to focus its resources on defending population centers and preventing the Taliban from controlling strategic areas, and 656 generals were referred to retirement to renew the vitality of the army⁴². Then, there was a decision in August 2018 to increase the size of the Afghan army's special forces from division to corps to reach 33,000 by 2020, while NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg pledged to increase the size of the alliance's force in Afghanistan from 13,000 to 16,000 soldiers⁴³.

| Year | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 |
|---------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Number of accidents | 22051 | 22634 | 23712 | 23744 | 22478 |

Number of accidents by year in Afghanistan according to data reported in (The Situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security)

In February 2020 the USA concluded a peace agreement with the Taliban in Doha. US President Trump announced a deadline for withdrawing from Afghanistan in May 2021 and then postponed it to September 2021 without linking the withdrawal to any progress in the negotiation process to build a new political system. Also, Washington agreed to exclude the Afghan government from the negotiation process in response to the Taliban's request. These decisions were followed by a gradual reduction in the number of US and NATO soldiers in Afghanistan, they reached 9,592 soldiers by February 2021, including 2,500 American soldiers⁴⁴, in conjunction with the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners, that conveyed a message to the Afghan allies said that Washington and NATO had abandoned them. So, they lost the will to fight which prompted many of them to communicate with the Taliban to arrange their future situations.

Finally, following Washington's decision to withdraw its forces, NATO foreign and defence ministers decided during their

meeting in April 2021 to start withdrawing their soldiers from Afghanistan by May 1 and complete the withdrawal within a few months. With Kabul's falling into the hands of the Taliban in August 2021 and the collapse of the Afghan government, by September, NATO withdrew all its forces to end the longest war in its history that lasted 20 years⁴⁵, during which 3,590 soldiers of the international security force lost their lives⁴⁶.

Why did NATO fail in Afghanistan?

NATO committed many strategic and tactical mistakes in the Afghanistan war, which hindered its ability to achieve the desired goals of its involvement in the war. Among the most prominent of those mistakes:

1-Involving in the Afghanistan war without having measurable strategic goals as the expansion of ISAF missions under NATO command occurred in light of the US army's preoccupation in the Iraq war, which force NATO to engage in a battle that did not prepare for it and raising wide goals that did not take into

39- Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (27 February 2015): 4. <https://undocs.org/S/2015/151>.
 40 - Resolute Support Mission (RSM): Key Facts and Figures, NATO, May 2015. https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2015_05/20150508_1505-RSM-Placemat.pdf
 41 - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (10 December 2015): 1. <https://undocs.org/en/S/2015/942>.
 42 - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security", (10 September 2018): 6. <https://undocs.org/S/2018/824>.
 43 - Ibid., 7.
 44 - Resolute Support Mission (RSM): Key Facts and Figures, NATO, February 2021. https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/02/pdf/2021-02-RSM-Placemat.pdf
 45 - Press briefing on Afghanistan by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, NATO, 17 August 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_186040.htm?selectedLocale=en
 46 - Casualties, 6 January 2022, <http://casualties.org/App/AfghanFatalities>.



account the facts of the Afghan society, such as building a central allied Afghan state with a prosperous economy capable of managing its territory. Also, ISAF soldiers were not prepared and equipped to carry out counterinsurgency operations based on winning the Afghan's minds and hearts and improving their social and economic conditions. Unfortunately, ISAF carried out air raids, combat operations that inflicted heavy casualties on civilians, which made the Afghans look at her hostilely.

2-NATO adopted the American approach in the Afghan scene, which relies on local allies, many of whom are minorities and former warlords of notoriety⁴⁷, as well as adopting a narrow view towards al-Qaeda and the Taliban that puts them in one place despite the many differences between them⁴⁸. The Taliban is a local Afghan movement that seeks to rule Afghanistan According to the provisions of Islamic Sharia and did not engage in any armed activities outside its country, while Al-Qaeda is a super-national organization that seeks to target American and Israeli interests around the world to push Washington to stop supporting Israel and the Arab regimes allied to the United States. The international community did not begin to differentiate between Al-Qaeda and the Taliban until 17 June 2011, when the Security Council issued Resolutions 1988 (2011) and 1989 (2011), which divided the international sanctions committee for the Taliban and Al-Qaeda into two separate committees, one of which targets individuals, groups, and entities associated with the Taliban movement, the other target Al-Qaeda and its associated individuals, groups, and entities⁴⁹.

3-NATO was not able to understand the privacy and culture of Afghan society. For example, the German training program focused on training Afghan police individuals according to the European style that revolves around the rule of law, while most of the trainees were illiterate⁵⁰, and most of them viewed their work as a means of gaining money, imposing royalties and receiving bribes in a situation exacerbated by the weakness of the control and monitoring mechanisms within the police institution. Also, former warlords who held government positions continued to monopolize financial revenues in their areas of influence and organized and managed drug smuggling operations. The salaries of judges were very low, 100\$ per month on average which led to the extension of bribery among the judiciary's employees⁵¹, as well as nepotism, emerged in appointing individuals to government positions away from the factors of efficiency and merit, so Afghanistan occupied the 179th rank among 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index according to Transparency International for the year 2009⁵². These conditions contributed to squandering the fruits of counter-insurgency operations and showing international forces in the eyes of Afghans as supportive of the corrupt⁵³.

4-The war in Afghanistan revealed that the military capabilities of most of the armies of NATO member states were affected by the decline in military spending after the end of the Cold War. Except for US military spending, NATO military spending decreased as a percentage of GDP from 2.06% in 1998 to 1.73% in 2007⁵⁴. This negatively reflected the lack of equipment in most member states' armies and its lack of development compared to the American armed forces.

5-To share the burdens and distribute the tasks, NATO worked in Afghanistan according to a strategy called "the leading nation" The goals were divided into files with different priorities. The American armed forces took over a file for rebuilding the Afghan army, while the British army took over the anti-drug file. While Germany took over the file of rehabilitating the Afghan police, the Italians rehabilitated the judiciary and justice sector, and Japan took over the disarmament of militias. The strategy of the leading nation for each file failed to achieve the desired goals, as the resources provided by each country varied to fulfill the tasks entrusted to it in the absence of a unified entity that allocates resources and coordinates efforts.

For example, Italy's failure to build the justice sector after allocating limited resources and a small team to this task hampered Britain's anti-drug efforts. In the event of the arrest of drug smugglers, corruption in the Afghan police and judiciary would help in the release of the detainees⁵⁵. Likewise, NATO members did not share the burdens of the fighting, whether in terms of human resources, equipment, or financing. With Washington's awareness of the magnitude of the failure, it was difficult for it to redistribute tasks due to the sensitivity of each country to withdrawing the file it supervises.

6-Official estimates of the United States, NATO, and the United Nations on Afghanistan were unrealistic in highlighting the capabilities of the Afghan security forces as most members of the Afghan security forces were incompetent and inability to fight in isolation from international intelligence and air support. The published official reports were full of the assumptions that the Taliban was unpopular and the Afghan government portrayed as the force having public support, while it was isolated, popularly hated, and less effective at the local level⁵⁶.

Conclusion

The war in Afghanistan revealed the limits of NATO's capabilities and clarified that NATO engaged in this war without having precise measurable goals, and not estimating the size of the resources and requirements necessary for success. Also, the fear of incurring human losses dominated the political leaders of many NATO member states, this appeared in the refusal to deploy their soldiers in the hot spots in Afghanistan, which raised the issue of imbalance in the sharing of burdens and risks among the NATO members, and clear that the diversity of the participating forces in ISAF was a load more than be an addition.

⁴⁷ - Andrea Carati, "No Easy Way Out: Origins of NATO's Difficulties in Afghanistan". *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol 36, no: 2 (2015): 208, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2015.1061753>.

⁴⁸ - *Ibid.*, 204.

⁴⁹ - Security Council, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and Security", (21 September 2011): 4, <https://undocs.org/S/2011/590>.

⁵⁰ - Security Council, 7 March 2006, p:17.

⁵¹ - Security Council, 21 September 2007, p:9.

⁵² - CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS INDEX, Transparency International. https://files.transparencymedia.org/images/2009_CPI_SourcesByCountry.pdf

⁵³ - Security Council, 11 September 2006, p:3.

⁵⁴ - "The Military Balance", (International Institute of Strategic Studies: IISS, 2009), 106.

⁵⁵ - Michael G. Waltz, (61-62).

⁵⁶ - Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Reasons for the Collapse of Afghan Forces*, CSIS, 17 August 2021. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/reasons-collapse-afghan-forces>



There was also a noticeable shortcoming in NATO's logistics in Afghanistan as its pre-prepared deployment plans were limited to the European continent not to engage in protracted military operations in a landlocked Asian country like Afghanistan. The decision to withdraw from Afghanistan was related to local factors for each country, especially the United States, which is interesting in the competition with China, not linked to the situation of the Afghan government.

NATO's experience in Afghanistan represents its first intelligible failure of it. The chaotic withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan will affect the political will of

the member states of the alliance, and will make them more patient in conducting military operations away from their bases in Europe, and will prompt them to re-evaluate the role of NATO and the extent of its ability to tend towards globalization, to become more preoccupied with more limited operations such as training, advising and humanitarian assistance away from combat operations and counterinsurgency. The traditional understanding of Europe's collective security, and the view of NATO as a defensive alliance that does not look for problems abroad to solve, will also become more prominent.

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