

# AMERICA HAS LOST THE AFGHAN WAR

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The Remnants of an Army, a famous oil on canvas by the 19th century artist Elizabeth Butler, is a lasting image of the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-1842). It depicts William Brydon, a medical officer in the British Indian Army, arriving in Jalalabad from Kabul on horseback in 1842. Both Brydon, who was wounded, and his horse look exhausted. Brydon was the only survivor of the 16,000 soldiers and camp followers who were retreating from Kabul after the British invasion went awry.

One hundred and thirty-seven years later, the Soviet Union sent troops to Afghanistan to bolster its client communist regime. A decade passed before the Soviet troops too withdrew in ignominy. And again in 2001, the U.S., the sole superpower of the post-Soviet world, sent troops to Afghanistan launching its 'War on Terror'. Now, after 17 years of the war, with the U.S. and the Taliban agreeing 'in-principle' to a framework for peace that would provide the Americans a face-saving exit from Afghanistan, it's hard to miss the echoes from history.

Afghanistan has historically been a difficult place for external invaders, thanks to its complex tribal equations and its rugged mountainous terrain. It's a classic example of a country whose geopolitical destiny is defined by geography. The British Empire sent troops to Afghanistan in 1839 as part of the 'Great Game'. They feared that the Russians would take over Afghanistan and be at the border of India, "the jewel in the British Crown". To pre-empt that, they conquered Kabul, toppled the Emir of Afghanistan, Dost Mohammad Khan, and installed their protegee Shah Shujah Durrani in power. When the invasion became unsustainable in the wake of the violent resistance by tribal fighters, mainly the faction led by Dost Mohammad's son, Akbar Khan, the British decided to withdraw. But while withdrawing, all their troops but Brydon were massacred, and Dost Mohammad went on to recapture Kabul.

The Soviets made the same mistake. They sent troops to Afghanistan after an intra-party coup in the country. The Soviets were wary of Hafizullah Amin, who captured power after assassinating Nur Mohammad Taraki, the leader of the 1978 communist coup. In December 1979, Leonid Brezhnev deployed troops to Afghanistan. The Soviets staged another coup, murdered Amin, and installed Babrak Karmal, a Moscow loyalist, as President. Given their defeat in the Vietnam War and their loss of Iran following the 1979 Revolution, the Americans saw the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan as an opportunity. They began supporting the mujahideen, the tribal warriors who were fighting both the communist regime and its Soviet backers, with help from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which were worried about the expansion of communism to the Muslim world. A decade later, the Soviets realised that the occupation had become unsustainable and pulled back.

When the U.S. decided to attack the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, President George W. Bush said the 'War on Terror' would not end "until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated". This was a tall order. The U.S. toppled the Taliban quickly and Afghanistan eventually got an elected government under President Hamid Karzai. But after 17 years of fighting, the war has reached nowhere. Since 2009, when the United Nations started documenting the casualties of the war, nearly 20,000 Afghan civilians have been killed in conflict and another 50,000 wounded. The U.S., which has spent some \$877 billion on the war, has lost at least 2,000 military personnel in Afghanistan since the war began.

And what did it get in return? The Taliban, which retreated in 2001, is on the comeback trail. Some estimates suggest that nearly half of Afghanistan, mostly the mountainous hinterlands, is

now controlled by the Taliban. In the east, a small cell of the Islamic State is well-entrenched and has carried out a series of sectarian attacks in recent months, killing hundreds of Hazara Shias. The government is grappling with chronic corruption, and regional satraps call the shots outside Kabul.

U.S. President Donald Trump has made it clear many times that he wants to bring American troops back home. Yet he decided to send more troops to Afghanistan in 2017 to step up the fight against the Taliban. Since then, the U.S. has carried out large-scale air operations in Afghanistan, but it has failed to arrest the Taliban's momentum. The group continues to hold sway in rural Afghanistan and retains the capability to strike anywhere in the country. Just since 2014, Afghanistan has lost some 45,000 soldiers in battle. Amid mounting losses and an inability to break the stalemate in the conflict, the Americans, like the British Empire in the 19th century and the Soviets in the 20th century, seem to have realised that the first major war of the 21st century is no longer sustainable.

The question is, what next? The U.S. says it has got assurance from the Taliban that the group won't provide a safe haven to terror groups in Afghanistan. It will also push for a ceasefire and intra-Afghan talks. But the fact remains that the U.S. has already conceded a lot to the Taliban. The Taliban said it would not talk to the Afghan administration; it does not acknowledge the government's legitimacy. The Americans accepted this and held direct talks with the insurgents, who negotiated from a position of strength. The U.S. has also agreed, in principle, to pull out troops, the biggest Taliban demand, without any clear agreement on the future role of the Taliban. This shows how desperate the U.S. is to get out of Afghanistan, a war it has lost badly. It will be exiting on terms largely dictated by the Taliban. It would be naive to say that the Taliban fought the war for 17 years only to reach an agreement with the Americans. It fought for power, which it lost with the arrival of American troops in 2001. And it's certain that once the Americans leave, the Taliban will challenge Kabul one way or the other.

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Pakistan's identity crisis, going back to the debates since its creation, remains unresolved

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