

COMMENTARY

To consider Afghanistan's future, look to the country's past

What led to the current events unraveling today is the result of a global failure, one Brown University historian suggests.

By **Michelle Liu** Globe Correspondent, Updated August 19, 2021, 6:50 p.m.



Taliban members in an area controlled by the group on March 13, 2020, in Laghman, Afghanistan. The Taliban, rooted in rural areas of Kandahar province, in the country's ethnic-Pashtun heartland in the south, arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that followed the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. JIM HUYLEBROEK/NYT

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understanding the country's past is key to seeing what could happen to it in the future. This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Against popular belief, the war in Afghanistan has not been “the forever war.” Only in key points in international and global tensions – and not as much in immutable ethnic tensions – have conflicts erupted.

From the early 1900s to the early 1970s, for example, the country was in a largely stable period that fostered constitutional and legal developments. In 1923, Afghanistan ratified a constitution and was moving toward a progressive direction such as establishing education for women.

One reason the country attracts so much attention is because of its location. Afghanistan is not a peripheral no-man's zone in the world. It is at the center of geopolitical rivalries and historic trade routes for consumer goods and narcotics. It has historically been a springboard for imperial powers controlling or accessing much of Asia, including the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, and Persian Gulf. As early as the 19th century, Britain and imperial Russia had to agree to leave Afghanistan as a line of scrimmage.

Only with the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 did the more than four consecutive decades of chronic and punishing wars we are familiar with begin. Afghanistan became the site of a proxy war where more than 1 million Afghans died as the Soviet Union supported some factions and the United States, others. In 1978, the Soviet Union was supporting a client Communist government. In the name of liberating Afghanistan, but in practice to bleed the USSR out of revenge for Vietnam, the United States sponsored an insurgency to challenge this rule. Both countries dedicated multiple billions of dollars in armor, tanks, helicopters, mines, artillery, and anti-aircraft missiles – as well as training Afghan government soldiers and Islamist militants for over a decade. An entire generation of Afghans was raised on perpetual violence.

When the Soviet Union fell in 1991, Afghanistan was abandoned by the United States and the international community. The leaders of the Taliban movement today are veterans of the anti-Soviet war. Most of the Taliban's foot soldiers and supporters are a

veterans of the anti-Soviet war. Most of the Taliban's foot soldiers and supporters are a part of the abandoned generation – orphans and children of fighters who grew up in refugee camps in the 1990s and 2000s.

After funding a generation and training them on how to assist and wage brutal war, the international community left Afghanistan without much investment in the country's infrastructure. There was little interest in creating hospitals, schools, and public transport systems. Power, ideological and emotional vacuums were left behind that neighboring countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which supported the armed Islamist struggle, filled in. Bordering Afghanistan's northwest, Pakistan sheltered close to four million refugees, with Iran also hosting over two million Afghan refugees.

As authors Ahmed Rashid and Steve Coll among others have shown, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the United States was supporting the Taliban in the 1990s with the discovery of oil in the Caspian Sea, just as it supported foreign Islamist militants throughout the 1980s. But 9/11 and the United States' response would impact Afghanistan indelibly. Something that is not well known is that the Taliban had offered secretly to the United States to hand over Bin Laden to a neutral third country. As reported in numerous US and British news outlets, President George W. Bush declined and repeated unilateral conditions that had to be met without compromise. Even in December 2001, when the Taliban scattered, they offered a truce in exchange for their leader Mullah Omar to return to Afghanistan. The United States rejected it. After 20 years of war, \$83 billion dollars spent on military and \$2 trillion dollars spent on this war, it is painful to imagine the payoff if the United States and other countries had dedicated a fraction of that amount to rebuilding Afghanistan. These critical moments to arrest, try, and punish the orchestrators of the 9/11 terrorist attack – through multilateral cooperation and engagement with key stakeholders, and not so-called 'shock and awe' military force that ultimately failed to defeat the Taliban – were also missed.

Most recently, former president Donald Trump made a tremendous mistake to meet with the Taliban without the Afghan government—the same government the United States built up and supported. It gave the Taliban no incentive to negotiate and respect the recognized government. They made vague promises to uphold the Afghan constitution and with confidence, carried on with their campaign.

What led to the current events unraveling today is the result of a global failure. Not a single country or group of actors can be blamed – the entire international community must take responsibility, including not only Western powers but also Muslim countries and neighboring states. Tactical mistakes have been made by the Biden administration but historical blunders have been much more pivotal.

There are optimistic scenarios we can foresee under Taliban rule and there are more realistic and pessimistic scenarios. It is an extremely fluid situation with powder keg possibilities. There is the possibility of continuing civil war, military resistance to the Taliban, and a complete return to chaos, but also perhaps, substantially moderated and more pragmatic Taliban policies even as few beyond the movement's supporters seem very confident of that possibility at this moment; others remain cautiously optimistic. It depends on who you talk to; there is no blanket statement for what will happen amidst this complexity. Every country involved will have high stakes. There are military and economic stakes worth billions. But those with the highest stakes will be for the Afghan people.

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