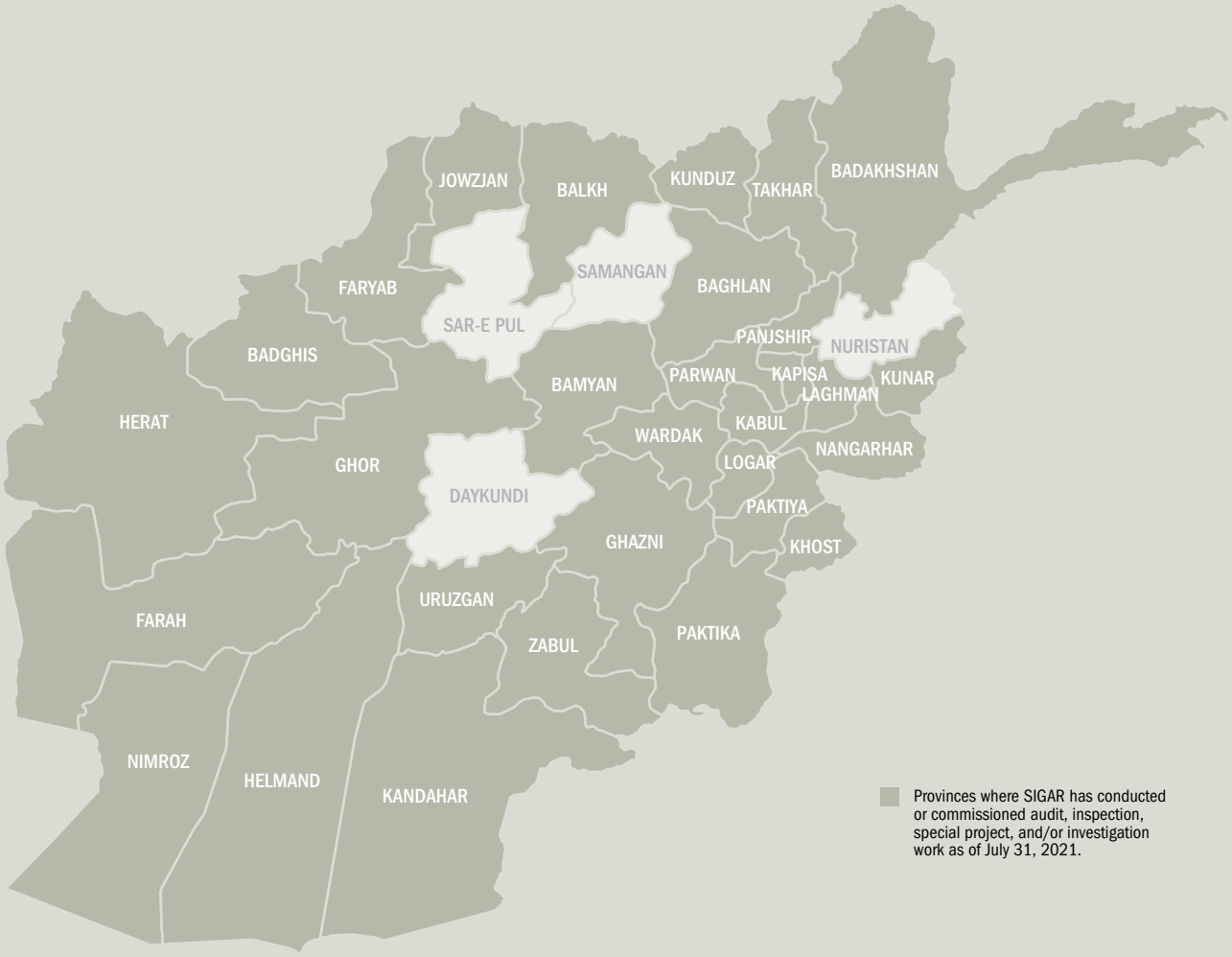
Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

WHAT WE NEED TO LEARN:
LESSONS FROM TWENTY YEARS OF AFGHANISTAN RECONSTRUCTION

August 2021



Cover photo credit:
Afghan army commandos stand on a sand bank as a U.S. Army Apache helicopter flies above in Marjah's Balakino Bazar neighborhood, on February 24, 2010. (AFP photo by Patrick Baz)

Special Inspector General
for Afghanistan Reconstruction

What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction is the 11th lessons learned report issued by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. The report examines the past two decades of the U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan. It details how the U.S. government struggled to develop a coherent strategy, understand how long the reconstruction mission would take, ensure its projects were sustainable, staff the mission with trained professionals, account for the challenges posed by insecurity, tailor efforts to the Afghan context, and understand the impact of programs. There have been bright spots—such as lower child mortality rates, increases in per capita GDP, and increased literacy rates. But after spending 20 years and $145 billion trying to rebuild Afghanistan, the U.S. government has many lessons it needs to learn. Implementing these critical lessons will save lives and prevent waste, fraud, and abuse in Afghanistan, and in future reconstruction missions elsewhere around the world.

As a retrospective, the report draws on SIGAR's 13 years of oversight work, including our 10 prior lessons learned reports and 760 interviews our staff conducted with current and former policymakers, ambassadors, generals, military officers, development experts, and other practitioners. These interviews in particular enable SIGAR to develop a uniquely nuanced understanding of Afghan institutions, the efforts by U.S. officials to reform those institutions, and how those efforts fared. Unlike SIGAR's previous lessons learned reports, this one does not make new recommendations for U.S. government agencies or the Congress. Instead, it poses questions that policymakers may wish to consider—both in Afghanistan and around the world—and includes some of the most relevant recommendations found in previous lessons learned reports. The questions for policymakers help frame the report's lessons and direct attention to the most critical issues.

Congress created SIGAR as an independent agency focused solely on the Afghanistan mission and its reconstruction issues. Unlike most inspectors general, who have jurisdiction only over the programs and operations of their respective departments or agencies, SIGAR has jurisdiction over all programs and operations supported with U.S. reconstruction dollars over the last 20 years, regardless of the agency involved. Because SIGAR has the authority to look across the entire $145 billion reconstruction effort, it is uniquely positioned to identify and address whole-of-government lessons.

SIGAR began its Lessons Learned Program in late 2014 at the urging of General John Allen, former commanding general of U.S. and NATO troops in Afghanistan, former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker, and other senior officials who had served in Afghanistan. They alerted us to the need for a comprehensive review of our efforts there in order to improve similar efforts in the future. The resulting lessons learned reports comply with SIGAR's legislative

mandate to provide recommendations to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of U.S.-funded reconstruction programs and operations; prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse; and inform the Congress and the Secretaries of State and Defense about reconstruction-related problems and the need for corrective action. The reports document what the U.S. government sought to accomplish, assess what it achieved, and evaluate the degree to which these efforts helped the United States reach its reconstruction goals in Afghanistan.

SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program comprises subject matter experts with considerable experience working and living in Afghanistan, aided by a team of seasoned research analysts. I want to express my deepest appreciation to the team members who produced this report: David Young, project lead; Jordan Kane, Paul Kane, Matthew Rubin, senior analysts; Harrison Akins, subject matter expert; Daniel Weggeland, senior subject matter expert, and Will Clifft, student trainee. I also thank Nikolai Condee-Padunov, program manager; Tracy Content, editor; Vong Lim, senior visual information specialist; Jason Davis, visual information specialist; and, last but not least, Joseph Windrem, Lessons Learned program director, without whom the entire lessons learned project would not have been possible. In producing its reports, the program also uses the significant skills and experience found in SIGAR's Audits, Investigations, and Research and Analysis directorates. I thank all of the individuals who contributed their time and effort to this report.

In addition, I am grateful to the many U.S. government officials at the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the U.S. Agency for International Development who have provided valuable insights and feedback for our lessons learned research. This report is truly a collaborative effort meant to not only identify problems, but also to encourage reforms to improve future reconstruction efforts.

Despite the U.S. troop withdrawal, the Biden administration has requested more than $3 billion for Afghanistan's reconstruction in the coming year. At this inflection point, I believe lessons learned reports such as this will continue to be critical and may ultimately be a key legacy of SIGAR. Through these reports, we hope to reach a diverse audience in the legislative and executive branches, at the strategic and programmatic levels, both in Washington and in the field. Using our unique interagency mandate, we intend to do everything we can to make sure the lessons from the most ambitious reconstruction effort in U.S. history are identified and applied—not just in Afghanistan, but in future conflicts and reconstruction efforts elsewhere in the world.

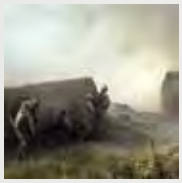
John F. Sopko,

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction

Arlington, Virginia

LETTER FROM THE INSPECTOR GENERAL II

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY VII



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. government has now spent 20 years and $145 billion trying to rebuild Afghanistan, its security forces, civilian government institutions, economy, and civil society. The Department of Defense (DOD) has also spent $837 billion on warfighting, during which 2,443 American troops and 1,144 allied troops have been killed and 20,666 U.S. troops injured. Afghans, meanwhile, have faced an even greater toll. At least 66,000 Afghan troops have been killed. More than 48,000 Afghan civilians have been killed, and at least 75,000 have been injured since 2001—both likely significant underestimations.

The extraordinary costs were meant to serve a purpose—though the definition of that purpose evolved over time. At various points, the U.S. government hoped to eliminate al-Qaeda, decimate the Taliban movement that hosted it, deny all terrorist groups a safe haven in Afghanistan, build Afghan security forces so they could deny terrorists a safe haven in the future, and help the civilian government become legitimate and capable enough to win the trust of Afghans. Each goal, once accomplished, was thought to move the U.S. government one step closer to being able to depart.

While there have been several areas of improvement—most notably in the areas of health care, maternal health, and education—progress has been elusive and the prospects for sustaining this progress are dubious. The U.S. government has been often overwhelmed by the magnitude of rebuilding a country that, at the time of the U.S. invasion, had already seen two decades of Soviet occupation, civil war, and Taliban brutality.

Since its founding in 2008, SIGAR has tried to make the U.S. government's reconstruction of Afghanistan more likely to succeed. Our investigations held criminals accountable for defrauding the U.S. government; our audits and special projects reports identified weaknesses in programs before it was too late to improve them; our quarterly reports provided near real-time analysis of reconstruction problems as they unfolded; and our lessons learned reports identified challenges that threaten the viability of the entire American enterprise of rebuilding Afghanistan, and any similar efforts that may come after it. SIGAR has issued 427 audits, 191 special project reports, 52 quarterly reports, and 10 comprehensive lessons learned reports. Meanwhile, SIGAR's criminal investigations have resulted in 160 convictions. This oversight work has cumulatively resulted in $3.84 billion in savings for the U.S. taxpayer.

After conducting more than 760 interviews and reviewing thousands of government documents, our lessons learned analysis has revealed a troubled reconstruction effort that has yielded some success but has also been marked by too many failures. Using this body of work, as well as the work of other oversight organizations, SIGAR has identified seven key lessons that span the entire 20-year campaign and can be used

in other conflict zones around the globe. These lessons form the backbone of this report, with a chapter devoted to exploring each in detail:

1. **Strategy: The U.S. government continuously struggled to develop and implement a coherent strategy for what it hoped to achieve.**

   The challenges U.S. officials faced in creating long-term, sustainable improvements raise questions about the ability of U.S. government agencies to devise, implement, and evaluate reconstruction strategies. The division of responsibilities among agencies did not always take into account each agency's strengths and weaknesses. For example, the Department of State is supposed to lead reconstruction efforts, but it lacked the expertise and resources to take the lead and own the strategy in Afghanistan. In contrast, DOD has the necessary resources and expertise to manage strategies, but not for large-scale reconstruction missions with significant economic and governance components. This meant no single agency had the necessary mindset, expertise, and resources to develop and manage the strategy to rebuild Afghanistan. For the U.S. government to successfully rebuild a country, especially one still experiencing violent conflict, civilian agencies will need the necessary resources and flexibility to lead in practice, not just on paper.

   This poor division of labor resulted in weak strategy. While initially tied to the destruction of al-Qaeda, the strategy grew considerably to include the defeat of the Taliban, an insurgent group deeply entrenched in Afghan communities, then expanded again to include corrupt Afghan officials who undermined U.S. efforts at every turn. Meanwhile, deteriorating security compelled the mission to grow even further in scope. U.S. officials believed the solution to insecurity was pouring ever more resources into Afghan institutions—but the absence of progress after the surge of civilian and military assistance between 2009 and 2011 made it clear that the fundamental problems were unlikely to be addressed by changing resource levels. The U.S. government was simply not equipped to undertake something this ambitious in such an uncompromising environment, no matter the budget. After a decade of escalation, the United States began a gradual, decade-long drawdown that steadily revealed how dependent and vulnerable the Afghan government remains.

2. **Timelines: The U.S. government consistently underestimated the amount of time required to rebuild Afghanistan, and created unrealistic timelines and expectations that prioritized spending quickly. These choices increased corruption and reduced the effectiveness of programs.**

   The U.S. reconstruction effort in Afghanistan could be described as 20 one-year reconstruction efforts, rather than one 20-year effort. U.S. officials often underestimated the time and resources needed to rebuild Afghanistan, leading to short-term solutions like the surge of troops, money, and resources from 2009–2011. U.S. officials also prioritized their own political preferences for what they wanted

reconstruction to look like, rather than what they could realistically achieve, given the constraints and conditions on the ground. Early in the war, U.S. officials denied the mission resources necessary to have an impact, and implicit deadlines made the task even harder. As security deteriorated and demands on donors increased, so did pressure to demonstrate progress. U.S. officials created explicit timelines in the mistaken belief that a decision in Washington could transform the calculus of complex Afghan institutions, powerbrokers, and communities contested by the Taliban.

By design, these timelines often ignored conditions on the ground and forced reckless compromises in U.S. programs, creating perverse incentives to spend quickly and focus on short-term, unsustainable goals that could not create the conditions to allow a victorious U.S. withdrawal. Rather than reform and improve, Afghan institutions and powerbrokers found ways to co-opt the funds for their own purposes, which only worsened the problems these programs were meant to address. When U.S. officials eventually recognized this dynamic, they simply found new ways to ignore conditions on the ground. Troops and resources continued to draw down in full view of the Afghan government's inability to address instability or prevent it from worsening.

3. **Sustainability: Many of the institutions and infrastructure projects the United States built were not sustainable.**

Reconstruction programs are not like humanitarian aid; they are not meant to provide temporary relief. Instead, they serve as a foundation for building the necessary institutions of government, civil society, and commerce to sustain the country indefinitely. Every mile of road the United States built and every government employee it trained was thought to serve as a springboard for even more improvements and to enable the reconstruction effort to eventually end. However, the U.S. government often failed to ensure its projects were sustainable over the long term. Billions of reconstruction dollars were wasted as projects went unused or fell into disrepair. Demands to make fast progress incentivized U.S. officials to identify and implement short-term projects with little consideration for host government capacity and long-term sustainability. U.S. agencies were seldom judged by their projects' continued utility, but by the number of projects completed and dollars spent.

Over time, U.S. policies emphasized that all U.S. reconstruction projects must be sustainable, but Afghans often lacked the capacity to take responsibility for projects. In response, the U.S. government tried to help Afghan institutions build their capacity, but those institutions often could not keep up with U.S. demands for fast progress. Moreover, pervasive corruption put U.S. funds sent through the Afghan government at risk of waste, fraud, and abuse. These dynamics motivated U.S. officials to provide most assistance outside Afghan government channels. While expedient, the approach meant that Afghan officials were not getting experience in managing and sustaining U.S. reconstruction projects over the long term. As a result,

even when programs were able to achieve short-term success, they often could not last because the Afghans who would eventually take responsibility for them were poorly equipped, trained, or motivated to do so.

4. **Personnel: Counterproductive civilian and military personnel policies and practices thwarted the effort.**

   The U.S. government's inability to get the right people into the right jobs at the right times was one of the most significant failures of the mission. It is also one of the hardest to repair. U.S. personnel in Afghanistan were often unqualified and poorly trained, and those who were qualified were difficult to retain. DOD police advisors watched American TV shows to learn about policing, civil affairs teams were mass-produced via PowerPoint presentations, and every agency experienced annual lobotomies as staff constantly rotated out, leaving successors to start from scratch and make similar mistakes all over again. These dynamics had direct effects on the quality of reconstruction. There were often not enough staff to oversee the spending, and certainly not enough who were qualified to do so. This was particularly true for civilian agencies, such as State or the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which should have been leading the effort but were unable to meaningfully perform that role. This compelled the better-resourced DOD to fill the void, creating tensions with civilian agencies that often had different ideas but fewer staff to offer.

5. **Insecurity: Persistent insecurity severely undermined reconstruction efforts.**

   The absence of violence was a critical precondition for everything U.S. officials tried to do in Afghanistan—yet the U.S. effort to rebuild the country took place while it was being torn apart. For example, helping Afghans develop a credible electoral process became ever more difficult as insecurity across the country steadily worsened—intimidating voters, preventing voter registration, and closing polling stations on election day. In remote areas where the Taliban contested control, U.S. officials were unable to make sufficient gains to convince frightened rural Afghans of the benefits of supporting their government. Insecurity and the uncertainty that it spawns have also made Afghanistan one of the worst environments in the world to run a business. The long-term development of Afghanistan's security forces likewise saw a number of harmful compromises, driven by the immediate need to address rising insecurity. The danger meant that even programs to reintegrate former fighters faltered, as ex-combatants could not be protected from retaliation if they rejoined their communities.

6. **Context: The U.S. government did not understand the Afghan context and therefore failed to tailor its efforts accordingly.**

   Effectively rebuilding Afghanistan required a detailed understanding of the country's social, economic, and political dynamics. However, U.S. officials were

consistently operating in the dark, often because of the difficulty of collecting the necessary information. The U.S. government also clumsily forced Western technocratic models onto Afghan economic institutions; trained security forces in advanced weapon systems they could not understand, much less maintain; imposed formal rule of law on a country that addressed 80 to 90 percent of its disputes through informal means; and often struggled to understand or mitigate the cultural and social barriers to supporting women and girls. Without this background knowledge, U.S. officials often empowered powerbrokers who preyed on the population or diverted U.S. assistance away from its intended recipients to enrich and empower themselves and their allies. Lack of knowledge at the local level meant projects intended to mitigate conflict often exacerbated it, and even inadvertently funded insurgents.

7. **Monitoring and Evaluation: U.S. government agencies rarely conducted sufficient monitoring and evaluation to understand the impact of their efforts.**

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is the process of determining what works, what does not, and what needs to change as a result. Conceptually, M&E is relatively straightforward, but in practice, it is extremely challenging. This is especially true in complex and unpredictable environments like Afghanistan, where staff turnover is rapid, multiple agencies must coordinate programs simultaneously, security and access restrictions make it hard to understand a program's challenges and impact, and a myriad of variables compete to influence outcomes. The absence of periodic reality checks created the risk of doing the wrong thing perfectly: A project that completed required tasks would be considered "successful," whether or not it had achieved or contributed to broader, more important goals.

SIGAR's extensive audit work on sectors spanning health, education, rule of law, women's rights, infrastructure, security assistance, and others collectively paints a picture of U.S. agencies struggling to effectively measure results while sometimes relying on shaky data to make claims of success. As detailed in this chapter, the U.S. government's M&E efforts in Afghanistan have been underemphasized and understaffed because the overall campaign focused on doing as much as possible as quickly as possible, rather than ensuring programs were designed well to begin with and could adapt as needed. As a result, the U.S. government missed many opportunities to identify critical flaws in its interventions or to act on those that were identified. These shortcomings endangered the lives of U.S., Afghan, and coalition government personnel and civilians, and undermined progress toward strategic goals.

* * * * *

In conclusion, this report raises critical questions about the U.S. government's ability to carry out reconstruction efforts on the scale seen in Afghanistan. As an inspector general's office charged with overseeing reconstruction spending in Afghanistan, SIGAR's approach has generally been technical; we identify specific problems and offer

specific solutions. However, after 13 years of oversight, the cumulative list of systemic challenges SIGAR and other oversight bodies have identified is staggering. As former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley told SIGAR, "We just don't have a post-conflict stabilization model that works. Every time we have one of these things, it is a pick-up game. I don't have confidence that if we did it again, we would do any better."[1]

This was equally apparent after the Vietnam War, when a war-weary and divided country had little appetite to engage in another similar conflict. After Vietnam, for example, the U.S. Army disbanded most active duty civil affairs units and reduced the number of foreign area officers, the Army's "regionally focused experts in political-military operations."[2] Special Forces moved away from counterinsurgency and instead focused on conducting small-scale operations in support of conventional forces. And USAID's global staff was gradually cut by 83 percent.

In other words, according to former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army General Jack Keane, "After the Vietnam War, we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war. In hindsight, that was a bad decision."[3] After all, declining to prepare after Vietnam did not prevent the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; instead, it ensured they would become quagmires.

Rather than motivating the U.S. government to improve, the difficulty of these missions may instead encourage U.S. officials to move on and prepare for something new. According to Robert Gates, former secretary of defense from 2006–2011:

> I have noticed too much of a tendency towards what might be called 'Next-War-itis,' the propensity of much of the defense establishment to be in favor of what might be needed in a future conflict. . . . Overall, the kinds of capabilities we will most likely need in the years ahead will often resemble the kinds of capabilities we need today.[4]

The post-Afghanistan experience may be no different. As this report shows, there are multiple reasons to develop these capabilities and prepare for reconstruction missions in conflict-affected countries:

1. They are very expensive. For example, all war-related costs for U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan over the last two decades are estimated to be $6.4 trillion.
2. They usually go poorly.
3. Widespread recognition that they go poorly has not prevented U.S. officials from pursuing them.
4. Rebuilding countries mired in conflict is actually a continuous U.S. government endeavor, reflected by efforts in the Balkans and Haiti and smaller efforts currently underway in Mali, Burkina Faso, Somalia, Yemen, Ukraine, and elsewhere.
5. Large reconstruction campaigns usually start small, so it would not be hard for the U.S. government to slip down this slope again somewhere else and for the outcome to be similar to that of Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, after the last two decades in Afghanistan and Iraq, State, USAID, and DOD have all signaled they do not see large-scale missions as likely in the future. The Stabilization Assistance Review approved by all three agencies in 2018 noted, "There is no appetite to repeat large-scale reconstruction efforts, and therefore our engagements must be more measured in scope and adaptable in execution."[5] Just as after Vietnam, today U.S. policymakers and the public they serve may have sound reasons for avoiding another prolonged conflict and reconstruction mission. However, that does not mean such an endeavor is avoidable in the future.

As SIGAR's *Stabilization* report notes, "there will likely be times in the future when insurgent control or influence over a particular area or population is deemed an imminent threat to U.S. interests."[6] If the U.S. government does not prepare for that likelihood, it may once again try to build the necessary knowledge and capacity on the fly. As seen in Afghanistan and Iraq, doing so has proven difficult, costly, and prone to avoidable mistakes.

As former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker observed, "You have to start working on it before you need it."[7] One former senior DOD official likewise noted that rebuilding another country requires advanced skills that must be cultivated ahead of time. "You wouldn't invent how to do infantry operations [or] artillery at the start of a war. You need [to already have] the science behind [reconstruction] and people who think about it 24/7."[8]

Building on SIGAR's body of work, as well as the work of inspector general offices across the government, this report points to conceptual, administrative, and logistical work that should be done between large-scale reconstruction efforts to increase the U.S. government's chances of success in future campaigns.

The nature and range of the investment necessary to properly prepare for these campaigns is an open question. In previous lessons learned reports, SIGAR has made recommendations for existing U.S. government offices to create a database of qualified personnel to call up when necessary, build interagency doctrine for security sector assistance, and establish anti-corruption offices within key agencies. As former U.S. envoy to Afghanistan James Dobbins observed, properly preparing "doesn't mean that you have to have a standing capability to immediately train [an entire army], but you need to have the know-how and an ability to surge those kinds of resources."[9] Others have argued that such an ability requires a permanent office with the authority and funding to prepare for, plan, execute, and evaluate all reconstruction missions.

U.S. agencies should continue to explore how they can ensure they have the strategic planning capabilities, reconstruction doctrine, policies, best practices, standard operating procedures, institutional knowledge, and personnel structures necessary for both large and small reconstruction missions.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As part of Operation Medusa, soldiers from 4th Platoon, Bravo Company, Royal Canadian Regiment, burst into a suspected Taliban stronghold in Pashmul, a small village north of Panjwai District, on September 11, 2006. (Photo by Graeme Smith).

The U.S. government has now spent 20 years and $145 billion trying to rebuild Afghanistan, its security forces, civilian government institutions, economy, and civil society. The Department of Defense (DOD) has also spent $837 billion on warfighting, during which 2,443 American troops and 1,144 allied troops have been killed and 20,666 U.S. troops injured.[10] Afghans, meanwhile, have faced an even greater toll. At least 66,000 Afghan troops have been killed.[11] More than 48,000 Afghan civilians have been killed, and at least 75,000 have been injured since 2001—both likely significant underestimations.[12]

The extraordinary costs were meant to serve a purpose—though the definition of that purpose evolved over time. At various points, the U.S. government hoped to eliminate al-Qaeda, decimate the Taliban movement that hosted it, deny all terrorist groups a safe haven in Afghanistan, build Afghan security forces so they could deny terrorists a safe haven in the future, and help the civilian government become legitimate and capable enough to win the trust of Afghans. Each goal, once accomplished, was thought to move the U.S. government one step closer to being able to depart.

While there have been several areas of improvement—most notably in the areas of health care, maternal health, and education—overall progress has been elusive and the prospects for sustaining this progress are dubious. The U.S. government has been often overwhelmed by the magnitude of rebuilding a country that, at the time

of the U.S. invasion, had already seen two decades of Soviet occupation, civil war, and Taliban brutality.

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After conducting more than 760 interviews and reviewing thousands of government documents, our lessons learned analysis has revealed a troubled reconstruction effort that has yielded some success but has also been marked by many failures. Using this body of work, as well as the work of other oversight organizations, SIGAR has identified seven key lessons that span the entire 20-year campaign and can be used in other conflict zones around the globe. These lessons form the backbone of this report, with a chapter devoted to exploring each in detail:

1. The U.S. government continuously struggled to develop and implement a coherent strategy for what it hoped to achieve.
2. The U.S. government consistently underestimated the amount of time required to rebuild Afghanistan and created unrealistic timelines and expectations that prioritized spending quickly. These choices increased corruption and reduced the effectiveness of programs.
3. Many of the institutions and infrastructure projects the United States built were not sustainable.
4. Counterproductive civilian and military personnel policies and practices thwarted the effort.
5. Persistent insecurity severely undermined reconstruction efforts.
6. The U.S. government did not understand the Afghan context and therefore failed to tailor its efforts accordingly.
7. U.S. government agencies rarely conducted sufficient monitoring and evaluation to understand the impact of their efforts.

By the time the Taliban fell in November 2001, 23 years of war had taken an extraordinary toll on Afghanistan's population and institutions. Then-Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who opened the U.S. embassy in early 2002, told SIGAR he arrived to find "absolute devastation. . . . There was almost literally nothing there." He remembered that interim president Hamid Karzai "had no real authority and nothing to work with, no military, no police, no civil service, no functioning society."[14] Afghanistan's GDP per

U.S. and Afghan officials gather to celebrate the delivery of wheat seed, fertilizer, and fruit trees as an alternative crop to poppy in Herat on February 21, 2009. (DOD photo by U.S. Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Monica R. Nelson)

capita was the fourth worst in the world.[15] As the World Bank wrote in March 2002, "Afghanistan's humanitarian, reconstruction, and development needs are immense. Its economy is in a state of collapse, its infrastructure destroyed, its formal state institutions severely undermined or nonexistent, and its social indicators the worst in the world."[16]

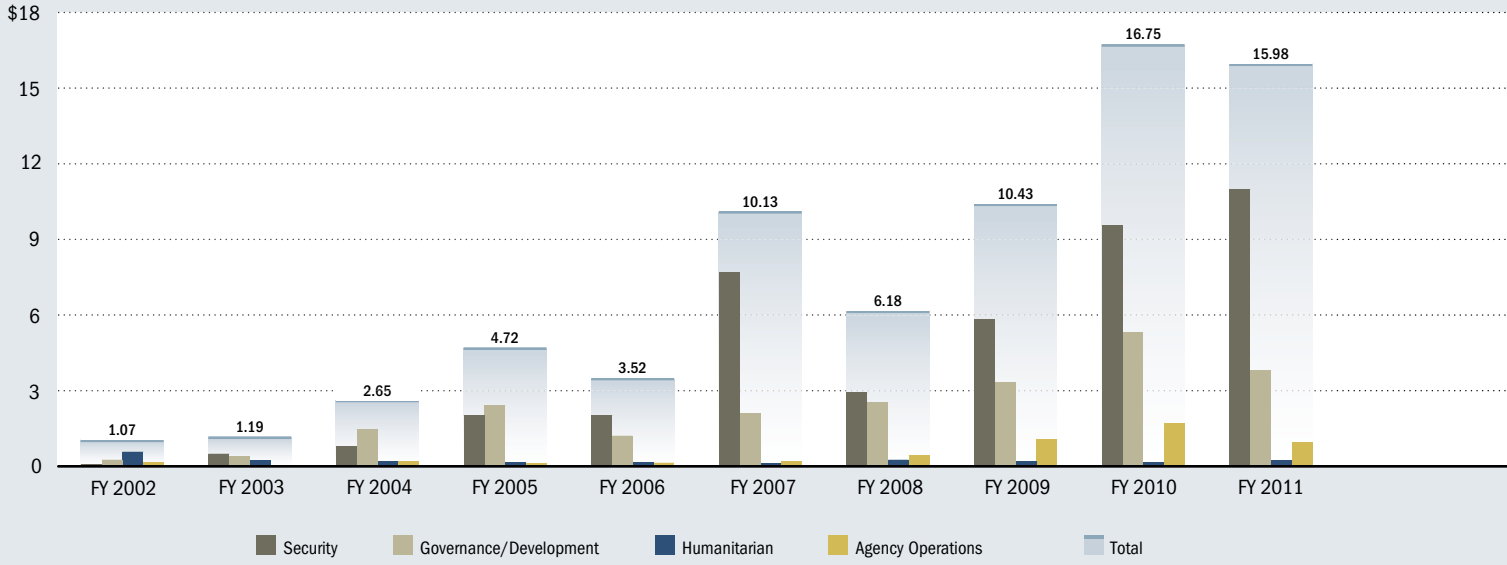
Afghans had no experience participating in elections, much less administering them. There was no independent media, and civil society was anemic. Life expectancy was 56 years, lower than 83 percent of countries at the time.[17] The mortality rate for children under the age of five was in the bottom 15 percent of countries globally.[18] Women and girls were officially banned from schools and the workforce. Only 21 percent of eligible children were enrolled in primary school.[19] Even as late as 2005, 64 percent of Afghan men and boys were illiterate, as were 82 percent of Afghan women and girls.[20]

To help Afghanistan climb out of that chasm, the U.S. government spent two decades and billions of dollars (see Figure 1 on pp. 4–5) running programs to:

- Train, equip, and pay the salaries for hundreds of thousands of Afghan soldiers and police;
- Build a credible electoral process by funding elections, cultivating political parties, and training election officials and observers;
- Educate more Afghans, particularly girls and women, by building, repairing, staffing, and equipping schools;
- Reintegrate back into society tens of thousands of armed fighters with few other skills, an abundance of weapons, and ample opportunity to resume violence;
- Develop the private sector by training entrepreneurs, lowering the costs of starting and running businesses, and creating an environment that would attract foreign and domestic businesses to operate in Afghanistan;

FIGURE 1

ANNUAL APPROPRIATIONS BY FUNDING CATEGORY ($ BILLIONS)



Note: Numbers have been rounded.

Source: Details of accounts, including sources of data, are provided in Appendix B of SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, July 30, 2021.

- Reduce rampant corruption in the Afghan government to improve its performance and legitimacy;
- Reduce the cultivation and trade of poppy and provide alternative livelihoods for Afghan farmers;
- Deliver services at the local level so that Afghans in contested territory would come to favor the Afghan government over the Taliban;
- Improve the quality and accessibility of health care by building, repairing, staffing, and equipping medical facilities;
- Train and empower Afghan officials to sustain the above efforts after the United States departs by collecting their own revenue and effectively managing their own national budget.

Twenty years later, much has improved, and much has not. If the goal was to rebuild and leave behind a country that can sustain itself and pose little threat to U.S. national security interests, the overall picture is bleak. By most measurements, security has progressively worsened. Even after the U.S. government spent more than $83 billion building the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), the Taliban controls more territory than at any point in the war, the number of effective enemy-initiated attacks is steadily increasing, and fear for personal safety among Afghans has never been higher (See Figure 2 on the next page).[21]

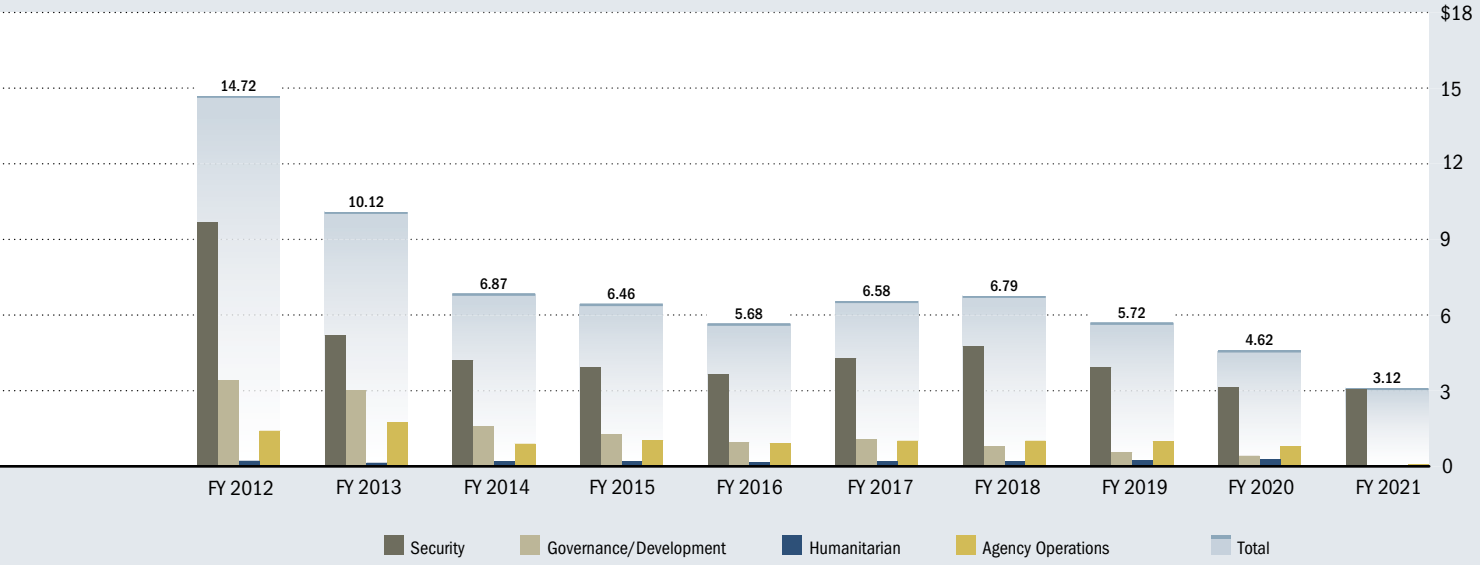
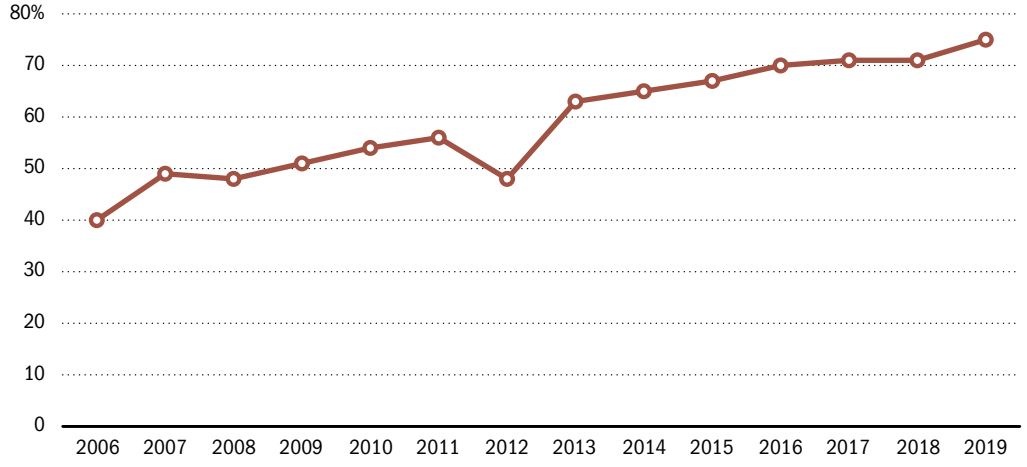


FIGURE 2

FEAR FOR PERSONAL SAFETY



Note: The data reflected above are the total respondents who answered "always," "often," and "sometimes." 2020 data was not available due to COVID-19.

Source: The Asia Foundation, "A Survey of the Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2019," 2019, p. 60.

While almost always positive, annual economic growth has fluctuated nearly in lockstep with donor assistance, revealing how artificial and thus unsustainable the growth has been.[22] By 2020, after adjusting for inflation, the country's GDP per capita had moved only from the world's fourth worst to its eighth worst.[23] Even as late as 2018, nearly 80 percent of government expenditures were supplied by donors.[24] Meanwhile, the cultivation of poppy has steadily trended upward for two decades, even as the U.S. government spent nearly $9 billion trying to reverse it.[25] Unsurprisingly, Afghanistan continues to be ranked among the most corrupt countries in the world.[26]

There is no doubt, however, that the lives of millions of Afghans have been improved by U.S. government interventions. By 2018, life expectancy had jumped from 56 to 65, a 16 percent increase.[27] Between 2000 and 2019, the mortality rate of children under five plummeted by more than 50 percent.[28] Between 2001 and 2019, Afghanistan's human development index increased 45 percent.[29] Between 2002 and 2019, Afghanistan's GDP per capita nearly doubled, and overall GDP nearly tripled, even accounting for inflation.[30] Between 2005 and 2017, literacy among 15- to 24-year-olds increased by 28 percentage points among males and 19 points among females, primarily driven by increases in rural areas.[31]

Despite these gains, the key question is whether they are commensurate with the U.S. investment or sustainable after a U.S. drawdown. In SIGAR's analysis, they are neither. As one former senior DOD official told SIGAR, "When you look at how much we spent and what we got for it, it's mind boggling."[32] As detailed in Chapter 2, the U.S. government had less influence over Afghan institutions than it hoped—not due to the amount of resources it gave, but due to how the U.S. government used them. The U.S. government's goals were often operationally impractical or conceptually incoherent, meaning U.S. officials and their implementing partners often tried to:

- Root out corruption, but also to jumpstart the economy by injecting billions of dollars into it;
- Improve formal governance and eliminate a culture of impunity, but also to maintain security, even if it meant empowering corrupt or predatory actors;
- Give Afghan security forces a competitive edge against the Taliban, but also to limit them to equipment and skills that they could sustain after a U.S. departure;
- Direct considerable reconstruction funds through the Afghan government to help officials practice public financial management, but also to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse;
- Build a credible election process from scratch, but also to respect Afghan sovereignty;
- Focus on making immediate progress on security and governance, but also to build the long-term capacity of Afghan officials;
- Reduce the cultivation of poppy, but without depriving the farmers and laborers who depend on it;
- Empower women to become more educated and economically independent, but also to be culturally sensitive and respect Afghan traditions.

Members of Khost Provincial Reconstruction Team check the quality of the work done on the Hassan Khot school roof on July 3, 2010. (Photo by U.S. Air Force Sr. Amn. Julianne M. Showalter, Khost Provincial Reconstruction Team Public Affairs Office)

There may exist a middle ground on each of these spectrums that would allow for success, but U.S. officials were seldom able to find it. More often they swung from one extreme to another, as officials were unable to plan more than a year into the future and were not on the ground long enough to see even their own short-term plans through to completion.

In theory, U.S. officials should have been able to anticipate, recognize, and address all of these problems when considering the mission's strategy. However, as the next chapter details, devising, implementing, and evaluating that strategy proved exceptionally difficult.

LESSON 1

The U.S. government continuously struggled to develop and implement a coherent strategy for what it hoped to achieve.

CHAPTER 2

STRATEGY

President Obama meets with his national security team on Afghanistan and Pakistan in the Situation Room of the White House on October 20, 2010. (White House Photo by Pete Souza)

Rebuilding a country devastated by decades of war is a daunting task. Senior U.S. officials in Washington and Kabul overseeing the reconstruction of Afghanistan routinely reviewed and modified their strategies as conflict dynamics changed on the ground and politics evolved in Washington. Former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, who oversaw the strategy from 2001-2008, paraphrased the strategy to SIGAR this way: "The goal was to help Afghanistan build a government, provide a prosperous life for the Afghan people, and thus create a resiliency against al-Qaeda's return."[33] When properly developed, strategies detail the ends, ways, and means of the mission.

Ends: the overarching goals or end states that guide all lower level decisions
Ways: the sequence of actions needed to achieve those goals
Means: the resources allocated to complete those actions

In other words, a strategy crafts a vision, identifies the necessary puzzle pieces, and lays out how those pieces will fit together to make the vision a reality. A strategy can fail in many ways. The division of labor for conceiving the strategy could set it up for failure; the ends could be unclear and subject to mission creep; or the ends, ways, and means might be poorly aligned with one another. Across two decades rebuilding Afghanistan, the U.S. government suffered from all three problems.

THE CHALLENGE OF OWNERSHIP

The responsibilities for developing different components of the reconstruction strategy were divided in problematic ways. The National Security Council (NSC) is in charge of developing national security policy, but the process is not designed for overseeing large-scale reconstruction efforts.[34] As former national security advisor Stephen Hadley told SIGAR, "There was just no process to do post-war mission planning."[35]

As a result, the NSC's primary contribution to reconstruction strategy was in the evaluation of the "ends," as these are closest to high-level policy. Below that, according to the former NSC "war czar" Douglas Lute, the "chain tends to get weaker."[36] The ends receive far more scrutiny than the ways and means, which are mostly left to the agencies to determine—particularly the Departments of State and Defense and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Each of these agencies then devises their own sub-strategies for specific time periods, geographies, or thematic areas (like counternarcotics or anti-corruption) in order to implement the specific ways and means of the larger strategy. This delegation is somewhat intuitive, as these agencies know best what resources they can bring to bear, and how. Yet these skills are not evenly distributed, which creates problems for developing and executing the ways and means.

Of the three, State was usually charged with articulating the ways and means—in other words, leading the interagency reconstruction effort in Afghanistan. Yet at no point during the 20-year campaign did any of SIGAR's interviewees believe that State had the ability to lead the effort in any meaningful way. Former senior NSC, State, and DOD officials variously said State was "not capable of leading," "biased against structured planning," lacks "a strong analytic or planning culture," and was weak at "defining the end state and then all the steps to get to the end state."[37] For example, according to one senior U.S. official, "We asked [State's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard] Holbrooke how he'd implement [the 2009 strategy], and he gave us 20 papers, one of which was solely about pomegranates. They weren't planners…We forced them to plan, but it was crap, a paper push."[38]

The deficiency is not new. The Clinton and Bush administrations both issued presidential directives to improve interagency planning and staffing related to stabilization and reconstruction missions (see Chapter 5). State established a Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (CRS) in 2004, but the Congress did not fund it for several years; in the meantime, it lacked the resources to meaningfully contribute to strategy and planning for the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan.[39] Like any organization with significant authority but minimal resources, CRS was marginalized by other offices across the interagency that viewed it as a bureaucratic threat.[40] The office's failures only reinforced the impression that State could not plan. So in 2011, CRS became a conflict-focused bureau at State with no mandate for leading interagency planning.[41]

With State unable to craft a vision for the ways and means of the mission, the only organization left to fill the void was DOD, which has extensive practice. According to Douglas Lute, "The only professional group that does real strategy is the military." So with Afghanistan, he told SIGAR, there was a heavy burden on the military for

strategy development "and an underappreciation of policy, diplomacy, and development. These are all considered secondary to the primacy of military ways."[42]

Much of the problem comes back to resources. State's budget and staff pale in comparison to DOD's. In 2021, Congress appropriated $696 billion for DOD, compared to $56 billion for State.[43] State has a total of only 24,000 American employees, a number that is fewer than the number of U.S. troops stationed in South Korea alone and which is dwarfed by the 1.4 million troops in the U.S. military globally.[44] State's 7,900 foreign service officers—the backbone of the agency—only slightly outnumber the musicians employed in DOD bands.[45]

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Imbalances like these have broad implications for the respective abilities of DOD and State to respond to emergencies. In their operating costs, U.S. military branches have built in an additional 10 percent "float" of staff and resources in case of an emergency—a luxury almost unthinkable for U.S. civilian agencies.[46]

Yet having more resources to develop expertise in strategy does not mean that the military is ideally suited to take the lead in cases like these. Inherently political reconstruction campaigns should be led by political institutions like State.[47] However, U.S. policymakers had no other viable option but to lean on the military and simply pretend State holds the reins in such missions.

The pretense continues today. The 2018 interagency Stabilization Assistance Review and the 2020 Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability both declared that State would lead U.S. government efforts in conflict-affected environments, and that USAID would be the lead implementer.[48] Similarly, the Global Fragility Act of 2019 charges State with "leading the drafting and execution of the strategy" for an important new effort to prevent and reduce violent conflict.[49] What these documents and their predecessors imply is that State should also be *equipped* to lead, but they do not say this explicitly, nor is it happening. The Global Fragility Act authorizes $200 million per year for five years for State and USAID, but as is the custom with development funds, the legislation dictates that no more than 5 percent may be spent on "administrative expenses" to ensure the remainder goes to beneficiaries in conflict-affected countries.[50] Although such a cap seems sensible at first glance, administrative expenses serve a purpose. Improving the ability of civilian agencies to lead these whole-of-government efforts requires them to be allowed to invest in themselves, not just in conflict-affected countries. If they cannot invest in themselves, additional funds are unlikely to be spent more effectively.

The issue goes deeper than funding levels, and involves the culture of accountability across the U.S. government. According to a former senior NSC official, "We just don't question DOD in the same way as we question development agencies in conflict zones. We don't scrutinize DOD fuel costs because we have . . . formalized $100 per gallon as . . . the cost of doing business."[51] Until State and USAID enjoy the benefits of DOD's accountability

standards in reconstruction efforts, State is unlikely to be given the necessary resources *between* these missions so that it can plan, lead, and perform *during* these missions.

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THE ENDS WERE MURKY, AND GREW IN NUMBER AND COMPLEXITY

The bureaucratic disarray over who should and would ultimately own the strategy made it more likely that senior U.S. officials would struggle to address basic challenges in that strategy. The most fundamental of questions were continuously revisited, including who America's enemies and allies were, and exactly what the U.S. government should try to accomplish.

Strategic Limitations of the International Alliance

Just as the United States struggled to implement a coordinated, unified strategy in Afghanistan, so too did the international community, as exemplified by the experience of NATO. Although NATO partners undoubtedly added value to the U.S.-led mission, command and control issues and "national caveats" hamstrung NATO's effectiveness and hindered the United States' ability to make the most of coalition support.[52]

The command and control issues that plagued NATO in Afghanistan can be traced to the organization's creation in the 1940s as a counter-Soviet alliance that granted member states full control over deployed forces and prioritized political unity among member states at the expense of operational unity between their militaries.[53] In fact, the treaty grants member states so much independence that the chain of command back to the force's home country always supersedes NATO orders, even in cases of operational plans, strategic directives, and rules of engagement that have been approved by consensus among member countries in NATO's principal decision-making body, the North Atlantic Council.[54] In practice, this means that national commanders can disobey orders from their multinational NATO commander if they object to the action.[55] One former NATO commander said his role was often reduced to providing strategic guidance, rather than commanding forces.[56] In other words, there was no single authority leading NATO forces in Afghanistan.[57]

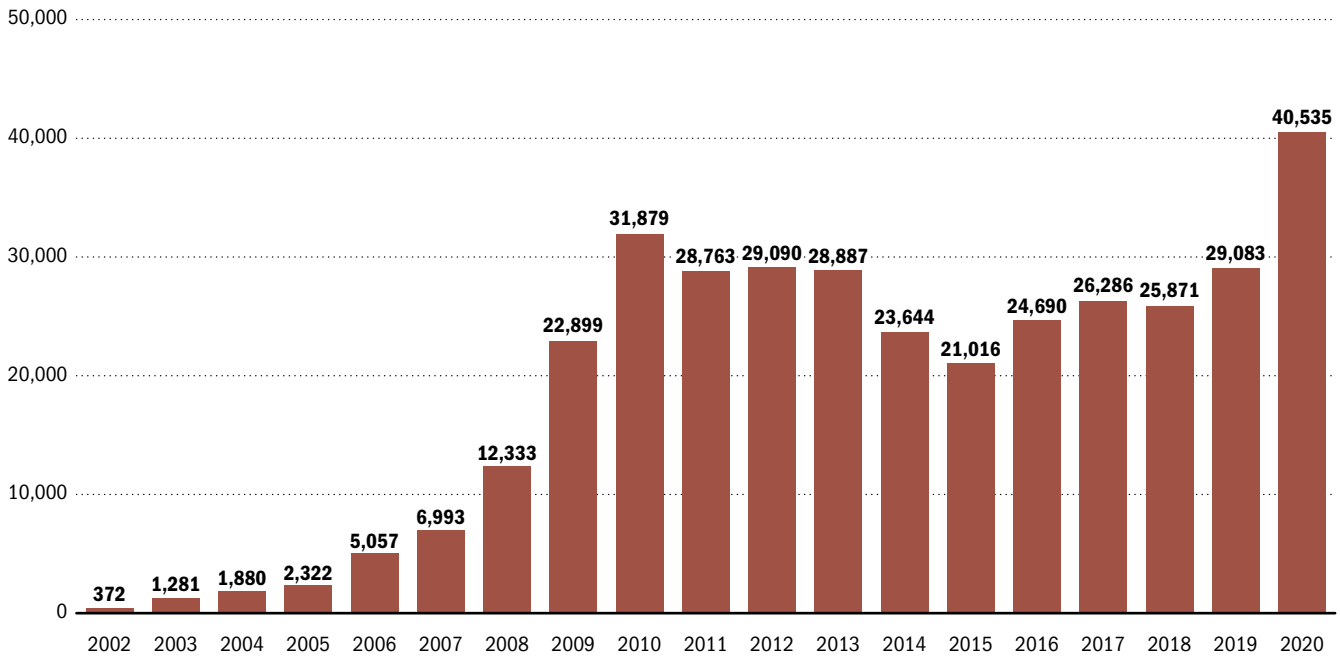
In addition to ad hoc decisions about whether to cooperate with the multinational commander's orders, member countries also had the option to carve out specific restrictions in advance on how their forces could be used. These restrictions, called "national caveats," meant that dozens of NATO countries limited how, when, and where their forces could be employed. This created a significant logistical burden for multinational commanders, who had to sort through nearly 60 caveats to determine who was even eligible to fulfill a mission—assuming they would accept it.[58] Most restrictions imposed geographic limitations on a force, but others specified whether a force could take offensive actions, defensive actions, or only observe targets; others specified whether a force could operate at night, or only during daylight.[59] These onerous restrictions sometimes created tensions within the alliance between countries that restricted their forces, and those that felt they were bearing an inequitable share of the combat burden.[60]

After initially defeating the Taliban, U.S. strategy focused on the permanent destruction of al-Qaeda, the perpetrator of the 9/11 attacks.[61] Beginning around 2003, the remnants of the Taliban regime launched a campaign of attacks that grew exponentially (see Figure 3). U.S. officials worried that the safe haven once provided to al-Qaeda could very well reestablish itself if the Taliban itself was not also continuously degraded.[62] Unlike al-Qaeda, however, the Taliban were primarily from the country's south and east, where they enjoyed a modicum of popular support.[63] Adding the Taliban to the list of enemies required a significant expansion of reconstruction efforts to convince more Afghans to turn on the Taliban and support their government. In theory, this approach would help keep the Taliban and (by extension) al-Qaeda out of Afghan communities. As Stephen Hadley told SIGAR, "We originally said that we won't do nation building, but there is no way to ensure that al-Qaeda won't come back without it."[64]

Despite these investments, security continued to worsen. As the mission slowly shifted away from counterterrorism toward reconstruction-heavy counterinsurgency, U.S. officials added a nebulous new enemy to the list. As Ambassador Ryan Crocker told SIGAR, "The ultimate point of failure for our efforts wasn't an insurgency. It was the weight of endemic corruption."[65] It became increasingly apparent that Afghan officials themselves were corrupting reconstruction efforts, exacerbating conflict, and driving

FIGURE 3

ENEMY-INITIATED ATTACKS, 2002–2020



Note: The chart reflects data on enemy-initiated attacks sourced from the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency for the years 2002 to 2009, and from the U.S. military headquarters in Afghanistan for the years 2010 to 2020. Defense Intelligence Agency data are generally derived from a larger number of sources and therefore captures more incidents, but these additional sources were not available for the full 19 years.

Source: Resolute Support, response to SIGAR data call, April 1, 2021, and June 12, 2021; Resolute Support, response to DOD OIG vetting, October 2019; U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, response to SIGAR data call, April 2015.

many Afghans into the arms of the Taliban.[66] Prosecuting these officials, or even removing them from office, proved extremely difficult, since it would mean "dismantling major pillars of support for the government itself," including its electoral institutions, according to two SIGAR lessons learned reports.[67] Thus, a strategy that initially focused on al-Qaeda expanded to include tens of thousands of Taliban fighters embedded within the population, and from there, to a large number of entrenched mid- and senior-level government officials in Kabul and around the country.

"The ultimate point of failure for our efforts wasn't an insurgency. It was the weight of endemic corruption."

—Ambassador Ryan Crocker

Highlighting just how far the mission had crept, a senior NATO official told SIGAR that the first draft of the 2009 U.S. military strategy for Afghanistan did not even mention al-Qaeda because they believed it was "no longer a problem."[68] Yet the war continued—but not because its core objectives were changing. Instead, U.S. officials came to believe that even the narrow mission of keeping al-Qaeda from returning required rebuilding institutions, and these were plagued by increasingly interconnected reconstruction problems.[69] For example, improving security required a stable economy to lure fighters away from the battlefield—but rebuilding the Afghan economy depended heavily on revitalizing the agricultural sector. That was only possible through building better roads so farmers could sell their goods; but building better roads required security for the construction workers. If progress could not be made on all fronts simultaneously, it was hard to make progress on any. With an ever-increasing list of enemies and priorities, it was tempting for U.S. officials to believe the solution was more troops and more aid. This assumption proved incorrect.

THE ENDS, WAYS, AND MEANS WERE POORLY ALIGNED

Throughout the 20-year campaign, there were recurring complaints by U.S. officials and commentators that there was no strategy.[70] For example, in 2009, when then-Vice President Joe Biden returned from a trip to Afghanistan, he told President Obama, "If you ask 10 of our people what we're trying to accomplish here, you get 10 different answers. This has been on autopilot."[71] It is difficult to reconcile complaints about a lack of strategy with the fact that U.S. administrations consistently articulated ends, developed ways, and allocated means for the mission. So these complaints more likely point to a different, though equally significant problem: the chronic misalignment of those ends, ways, and means.

To develop and align these components, planners need a detailed understanding of the object of reform (Afghanistan's institutions and population) and the tools that will create the reform (U.S. government agencies and partners). Knowing each allows planners to anticipate likely points of failure and adjust the ends, ways, and means accordingly. However, this knowledge was rare, and was often replaced with problematic

U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates meets with General Stanley McChrystal and other members of the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul on March 8, 2010. (DOD photo by Cherie Cullen)

assumptions. After coordinating Afghanistan strategy at the National Security Council from 2007–2013, Douglas Lute told SIGAR,

> We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan. We didn't know what we were doing. . . . We're going to do something in Afghanistan with $10 billion? Haiti is a small country in our own backyard with no extremist insurgency and we can't develop it. And we expect to develop Afghanistan with $10 billion? . . . What are we trying to do here? We didn't have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking. . . . It's really much worse than you think. There [was] a fundamental gap of understanding on the front end, overstated objectives, an overreliance on the military, and a lack of understanding of the resources necessary.[72]

In other words, U.S. officials not only had a poor understanding of Afghanistan, but also of their own institutions, which meant the Afghanistan mission's ends, ways, and means would inevitably be misaligned over the course of the war. For example, between 2001 and 2004, according to a former senior State official,

> It was a minimalism approach. We will help these guys set up a government and a bit economically and on the humanitarian side, but we are not going to do anything that smacks of nation building. . . . You have to be crazy if you want to get ambitious in Afghanistan.[73]

The thinking reflected an assumption at the time that Afghanistan was on a positive, if slow, glide path away from being an "ungoverned space" that hosted transnational terrorists.

In January 2002, USAID drafted a plan to help rebuild Afghanistan for $1.8 billion over 10 years and assumed security would improve at the local level, where reconstruction efforts should focus.[74] Estimates like these proved rather optimistic, perhaps knowingly. According to former U.S. Special Envoy James Dobbins, Bush administration officials

insisted on "absolutely minimizing the application of . . . military manpower and economic assistance" to avoid another costly peacekeeping mission, such as Bosnia.[75] Yet infrastructure and human development levels in Afghanistan were far worse than in the Balkans, so it was especially peculiar to argue that Bosnia's good fortune could be replicated in a much worse-off country with far fewer troops and funds per capita.

For example, around the time that reconstruction strategies were first conceived in Bosnia (1995) and Afghanistan (2002), Afghanistan had more than five times Bosnia's population and more than five times its infant mortality rate. Meanwhile, Bosnia had at least triple Afghanistan's literacy rate, five times its per capita income, and 19 times as many international troops per capita.[76] Simply put, Bosnia had better baselines before the conflict for donors to work with, the chasm created by the war was far shallower, and Bosnia saw far more early support to fill that chasm. As a result, after spending $4.4 billion between 1995 and 1999, donors had restored Bosnia's "roads, power supply, telecommunications, water supplies, and schools to near pre-war standards," according to the World Bank.[77]

Other U.S. government decisions in Afghanistan helped ensure there would be no peace to keep in the first place. For perspective, Bosnia benefitted from a proper peace settlement in 1995 that has prevented mass violence ever since.[78] In contrast, in Afghanistan, the U.S. government refused opportunities to reconcile with the defeated Taliban and declined to implement an inclusive, post-conflict peace process, so the Taliban soon rebuilt itself as a powerful insurgency.[79]

As a result, simply maintaining security levels—a goal that did not seem ambitious early in the war—proved very ambitious and poorly aligned with the ways and means the U.S. government planned to use. As the RAND Corporation observed in 2007, this kind of misalignment represents "the most common cause for failure of nation-building efforts."[80] When U.S. officials tried to remedy the misalignment, there was a special focus on the gap between ends and means, particularly as security worsened. This gap became particularly acute starting in 2003, when the U.S. diverted troops and reconstruction funds to the invasion and reconstruction of Iraq. As Dobbins told SIGAR, Bush administration officials soon "recognized that they had to resource [Iraq or Afghanistan] more substantially, [and] they chose Iraq because the situation there had degenerated more quickly. . . . They simply didn't have the forces. . . . You had several years of calculated neglect [in Afghanistan]. . . . It was intentional."[81]

Thus, as the Taliban resurged, the ambition of the U.S. mission surged with them, but the means kept falling further behind. According to a former senior NSC official, each of the U.S. strategic reviews in 2003, 2006, 2008, and 2009 concluded that the reconstruction and warfighting effort required more time and resources. Each review resulted in more of both, but the requests kept coming.[82]

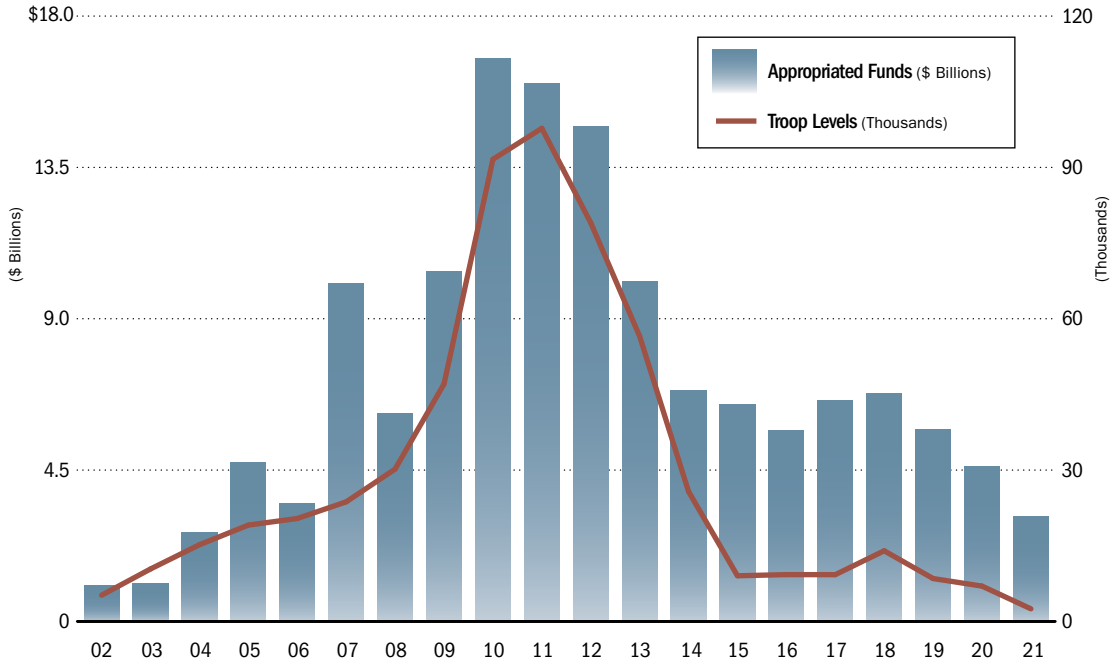
The strategy reviews in Washington and Kabul tended to imply that there was little to be done about the escalations in the mission's scope, as they were necessary to address

rapidly deteriorating security. Instead, the pliable variable was resources, which could be quickly increased in an effort to align the ends and means. Indeed, with the necessary political will, the U.S. government could and did obligate significant sums of money in a very short period of time. As one senior USAID official told SIGAR, "The strategy was 'money expended equals success.'"[83] However, the notion that the reconstruction problem was a mere money spigot to be turned on demonstrated a fundamental misunderstanding of the U.S. government's ability to harness any torrent of resources arriving in Afghanistan.

Specifically, with a particular focus on the ends and means, U.S. officials paid little attention to the ways—whether the U.S. government was even equipped to undertake something this ambitious in such an uncompromising environment, no matter how well funded. The money spent was far more than Afghanistan could absorb (see pp. 26–27).[84] It also grew to levels far beyond what U.S. agencies themselves could effectively absorb, disburse, and oversee.[85] As a result, U.S. officials could no longer claim the war was failing

FIGURE 4

U.S. APPROPRIATIONS AND U.S. TROOP LEVELS IN AFGHANISTAN BY FISCAL YEAR, 2002–2021



Note: Data from FY 2002 through FY 2007 are annual data, while data from FY 2008 through FY 2017 are averaged quarterly data. Data from FY 2002 through 2017 come from Congressional Research Service reports. Data from FY 2018 and FY 2019 come from the Brookings Institution, as no U.S. government data on U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan are publicly available for this period. Data from FY 2020 and FY 2021 come from public statements made by U.S. officials.

Source: SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, October 30, 2014, pp. 226–227; SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, January 30, 2021, pp. 172–173; U.S. Congressional Research Service, "Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001–FY2012: Costs and Other Potential Issues," R40682, July 2, 2009, p. 9; U.S. Congressional Research Service, "Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007–2020," R44116, updated February 22, 2021, pp. 7–8, 13–14; The Brookings Institution, "Afghanistan Index: Tracking variables of reconstruction and security in post-9/11 Afghanistan," August 2020, p. 5; Elizabeth McLaughlin, "Trump says 'it is time' for US troops to exit Afghanistan, undermining Taliban deal," *ABC News*, May 27, 2020; White House, "Statement by Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller on Force Levels in Afghanistan," January 15, 2021.

for lack of investment; instead, they were forced to reckon with the mission's severe structural flaws. In other words, the ways were so problematic that ramping up the means proved almost inconsequential—or even counterproductive—to the overall strategy.

The U.S. government refused opportunities to reconcile with the defeated Taliban and declined to implement an inclusive, post-conflict peace process, so the Taliban soon rebuilt itself as a powerful insurgency.

Senior U.S. officials overseeing the war especially struggled to recognize this, and usually claimed they were right on the cusp of progress. In 2011, British analyst Rory Stewart documented how

> Each new general in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2011 suggested that the situation he had inherited was dismal; implied that this was because his predecessor had had the wrong resources or strategy; and asserted that he now had the resources, strategy, and leadership to deliver a decisive year.[86]

SIGAR likewise reviewed the public statements of senior State and DOD officials in Washington and Kabul from 2011 to 2021 and found many similar claims.[87] Assuming these U.S. officials believed what they said in public, they all thought the problem was in their immediate control to fix. So the gulf between their confidence and the poor results can only point to severe deficiencies in their analysis of the ways.

For example, over the last two decades, the U.S. government has deployed more than 775,000 troops to Afghanistan and allocated more than $145 billion to rebuild the country.[88] However, as the rest of this report details, such extraordinary resources will not have the intended impact if those funds must be spent on compressed timelines that only worsen the problem (Chapter 3), if whatever is built cannot be sustained in the first place (Chapter 4), if the U.S. government lacks the experts to spend the money wisely (Chapter 5), if U.S. officials insist on rebuilding the countryside *while* it is being torn apart by war (Chapter 6), if U.S. officials do not understand the Afghan government and population (Chapter 7), and if the U.S. government is unable to measure the impact of its expenditures (Chapter 8). Had they seen these structural problems for what they were, U.S. officials would have had ample reason to conclude that they could not sufficiently change Afghanistan's institutions and population with the tools at their disposal.

A DECADE OF WITHDRAWAL

The poor results of the surge of troops from 2009 to 2012 revealed the limits of the U.S. government toolkit. In 2011, President Obama announced that all surge troops would be out by 2012 and that troops would continue coming home at a "steady pace" thereafter as "our mission [changes] from combat to support. By 2014, this process of transition will be complete."[89] A year later, he announced that the defeat of al-Qaeda was within reach, and that soon the strategy's focus would narrow to training Afghan forces and

counterterrorism.[90] The mission's scope was thus scaling back amid claims of sufficient progress to do so. The means soon followed suit. From 2012 to 2016, there was a 63 percent drop in U.S. military assistance and a 72 percent drop in U.S. civilian assistance.[91]

However, the drawdown laid bare just how hollow the alleged progress had been. Contested territory that had been cleared by U.S. forces was hastily "transitioned" to Afghan officials who were not ready, allowing the Taliban to seize districts as U.S. forces vacated them.[92] By 2015, President Obama implored Americans to be patient as worsening security and governance made it clear the Afghan government was often unable to take the reins. "We understood that as we transitioned, the Taliban would try to exploit some of our movements out of particular areas, and that it would take time for Afghan security forces to strengthen," Obama said in October 2015.[93]

Yet more time did not help. In the three years following this speech, the Afghan government lost control of an additional 16 percent of the country, according to DOD officials, who then decided to stop tracking such data altogether.[94] Then, when the United States began withdrawing its final forces from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, the Taliban took the opportunity to seize more than a quarter of the country in a matter of weeks, as Afghan security forces abandoned their posts or were overrun.[95] Thus, what Ambassador Nicholas Burns observed about the war's early years has remained true ever since: The Afghan government "cannot survive without us."[96]

SHIFTING THE STRATEGY TOWARD NEGOTIATIONS

While most security trend lines were moving in the wrong direction, the end of the surge compelled the U.S. government to start considering how it might withdraw without defeating the Taliban. Beginning at least as early as 2010, U.S. officials participated in a series of meetings with Taliban intermediaries and officials to facilitate a peace agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government.[97] By 2017, this logic had gained considerable momentum. However, at that point, with most troops out and the Taliban making gains, the U.S. government lacked the leverage to extract Taliban concessions at the negotiating table. To compensate, the Trump administration modestly increased troops and security assistance—and significantly increased bombings—in order to drive the Taliban to the negotiating table and achieve the "ultimate objective" of a political settlement that would end the war for all parties.[98]

Significant movement became possible when U.S. officials dropped a long-held principle by agreeing to announce a tentative withdrawal date before "intra-Afghan" negotiations had even begun.[99] U.S. officials hoped this major offering would induce a series of Taliban concessions, including reducing violence and breaking ties with al-Qaeda, neither of which have happened.[100] In fact, since the February 2020 U.S.-Taliban agreement that formalized the arrangement, the Taliban has significantly increased violence, including assassination campaigns of government officials, journalists, and civil society actors.[101] Meanwhile, the Taliban's ties to al-Qaeda only appear to be deepening, with al-Qaeda fighters now spread across 15 Afghan provinces.[102]

In other words, the U.S. government's neglect of the strategy's "ways" did not end with the surge but continued even as the U.S. scaled back its investment. U.S. officials ramped up the war without properly considering how they would fulfil the strategy, and ramped down in the misguided hope that they could influence the Taliban's decision making through negotiations. Because the group has been ascendant on the battlefield for more than a decade, it was poorly motivated to indulge peace talks beyond what was necessary to secure the release of more than 5,000 prisoners, ensure the removal of U.S. and UN sanctions, accrue international legitimacy, and claim credit for negotiating the departure of U.S. forces.[103] Notably, none of those objectives required compromise with the Afghan government. Describing recent intra-Afghan peace talks in Doha, one senior Afghan government negotiator said, "[The Taliban] thought they were there just to discuss the terms of [the government's] surrender. They said, 'We don't need to talk to you. We can just take over.'"[104]

The Afghan government "cannot survive without us."

—Ambassador Nicholas Burns

In April 2021, the Biden administration announced that a full U.S. military withdrawal would be complete by September, regardless of Taliban advances or where prospects for peace stood.[105] The decision left uncertain whether even the modest gains of the last two decades will prove sustainable. It was also the first explicit recognition by the U.S. government that its strategy across two decades had failed to bring the desired change and stood little chance of doing so.[106]

Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, participates in a signing ceremony with Taliban deputy leader Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, in Doha, Qatar, on February 29, 2020. (State photo by Ron Przysucha)

QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- How can State improve its ability to oversee reconstruction strategy and planning between large reconstruction missions? What institutional changes would be necessary to create that capability and authority? What would an office look like that lays the conceptual groundwork for reconstruction missions; conducts high-level thinking about aligning ends, ways, and means; and is operationally capable of overseeing and coordinating interagency reconstruction missions?
- What kind of mandate and funding would the Congress need to give State in order to develop the expertise and bandwidth to effectively manage reconstruction strategy and operations? How can that mandate be made strong enough to continue and thrive even without an ongoing large-scale reconstruction mission?

Relevant SIGAR Recommendations from Previous Lessons Learned Reports

State should take the lead in laying out a robust whole-of-government stabilization strategy, USAID should be the lead implementer, and DOD should support their efforts.[107]

The Congress should consider requiring State to develop and implement a stabilization strategy within a broader campaign strategy and in coordination with USAID and DOD.[108]

The NSC should establish an interagency task force to formulate policy and lead strategy on anticorruption in contingency operations.[109]

DOD should lead the creation of new interagency doctrine for security sector assistance that includes best practices from Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Vietnam.[110]

The Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff should update U.S. doctrine to clarify how the U.S. military provides security sector assistance as part of a multinational coalition. The doctrine should provide clear guidance for establishing and maintaining coordination between U.S. departments and agencies operating at the embassy in the host country.[111]

At the start of any major reconstruction effort, the National Security Council should direct the creation of an interagency working group led by USAID and staffed at the appropriate levels to plan and coordinate private sector development activities across civilian and military agencies.[112]

State should require that, for each country designated a major drug-transit or drug-producing country and receiving U.S. counternarcotics assistance, the U.S. ambassador to that country convene all U.S. agencies providing counternarcotics assistance to design a strategy that identifies actionable steps to integrate a counternarcotics perspective into larger security, development, and governance objectives. This strategy should be devised in close cooperation with the recipient country and should set forth practical and sustainable counterdrug goals.[113]

LESSON 2

The U.S. government consistently underestimated the amount of time required to rebuild Afghanistan, and created unrealistic timelines and expectations that prioritized spending quickly. These choices increased corruption and reduced the effectiveness of programs.

CHAPTER 3

TIMELINES

President George W. Bush meets with the National Security Council in the Situation Room of the White House on September 20, 2001. (White House photo)

Predicting how long a reconstruction mission might last or how many resources it might require is a fraught exercise. Few could have predicted the U.S. government would spend billions of dollars annually in Afghanistan for 20 years. Yet reconstruction estimates are not conducted in vacuums; they are driven by policymakers reflecting on what is in the interest of the American people. SIGAR has encountered no policymakers who think it is appropriate to be deeply involved in Afghanistan for 20 years, but a chain of decisions made by these policymakers ensured that would happen.

Not only did U.S. officials misjudge in good faith the time and resources required to rebuild Afghanistan, they also prioritized their own political preferences for what Afghanistan's reconstruction should look like, rather than what they could realistically achieve. Early in the war, U.S. officials denied the mission resources necessary to have an impact, and implicit deadlines made the task even harder. As security deteriorated and demands on donors increased, so did pressure to demonstrate progress. U.S. officials created explicit timelines in the mistaken belief that a decision in Washington could transform the calculus of complex Afghan institutions, powerbrokers, and communities contested by the Taliban.

By design, these timelines ignored conditions on the ground and forced reckless compromises in U.S. programs, creating perverse incentives to spend quickly and

focus on short-term goals. Rather than reform and improve, Afghan institutions and powerbrokers found ways to co-opt the funds for their own purposes, which only worsened the problems that these programs were meant to address.

By the time U.S. officials recognized that the timelines had backfired, they simply found new ways to ignore conditions on the ground. Troops and resources were drawn down in full view of the Afghan government's inability to address instability or even prevent it from worsening.

2001–2005: HARMFUL SPENDING PATTERNS ESTABLISHED

In 2002, the prevailing assumption within the Bush administration was that the conflict was over. Senior U.S. officials began to consider their immediate post-conflict reconstruction objectives. However, establishing a reconstruction timeline first required them to acknowledge that proper reconstruction was even a goal at all. Bush had campaigned on a platform against U.S. involvement in nation-building activities and had opposed armed humanitarian actions previously taken by the Clinton administration.[114] Weeks after 9/11, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz cautioned that in Afghanistan "there is a lot that could be done with just basic food, medicine, and education programs, if we don't set the bar too high."[115] In policy guidance, Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith was more blunt: "The U.S. should not plunge into a nation-building project."[116]

In keeping with an aversion to nation building, a focus on counter-terrorism, and a "light footprint approach" to the war, the first few years of the U.S. reconstruction effort were significantly underresourced.[117] Funds were inadequate to address the many challenges presented by a country whose government was unable to defend its borders or protect its citizens, and where schools were shuttered and food scarce.[118]

Few resources were initially available for reconstructing the country's security forces.[119] Short time horizons compelled the U.S. government to plan for a small, Afghan-sustainable force.[120] According to a U.S. military official charged with designing the Afghan National Army, U.S. troops were expected to depart by 2004. There was not enough time or interest to expand the force beyond Kabul.[121] Meanwhile, a German-led police capacity building program, which had started in 2002, proceeded glacially. This put local security outside of Kabul under the control of untrained officers affiliated with militias and strongmen.[122] This may have been by design: Resources and commitments were so thin that U.S. military officials were nervous about building national security forces because they might "threaten the influence of regional warlords," according to the same U.S. military official.[123] In what would become a pattern, a perpetual sense of imminent departure reduced the ability of U.S. officials to plan for the long term.

Efforts to build the capacity of Afghan civilian institutions were similarly underresourced. According to former U.S. Special Envoy to Afghanistan James Dobbins, "When the new Afghan government was set up, the ministers who had been selected by

the Bonn conference arrived, and what they got from the UN was one satellite phone and one car."[124]

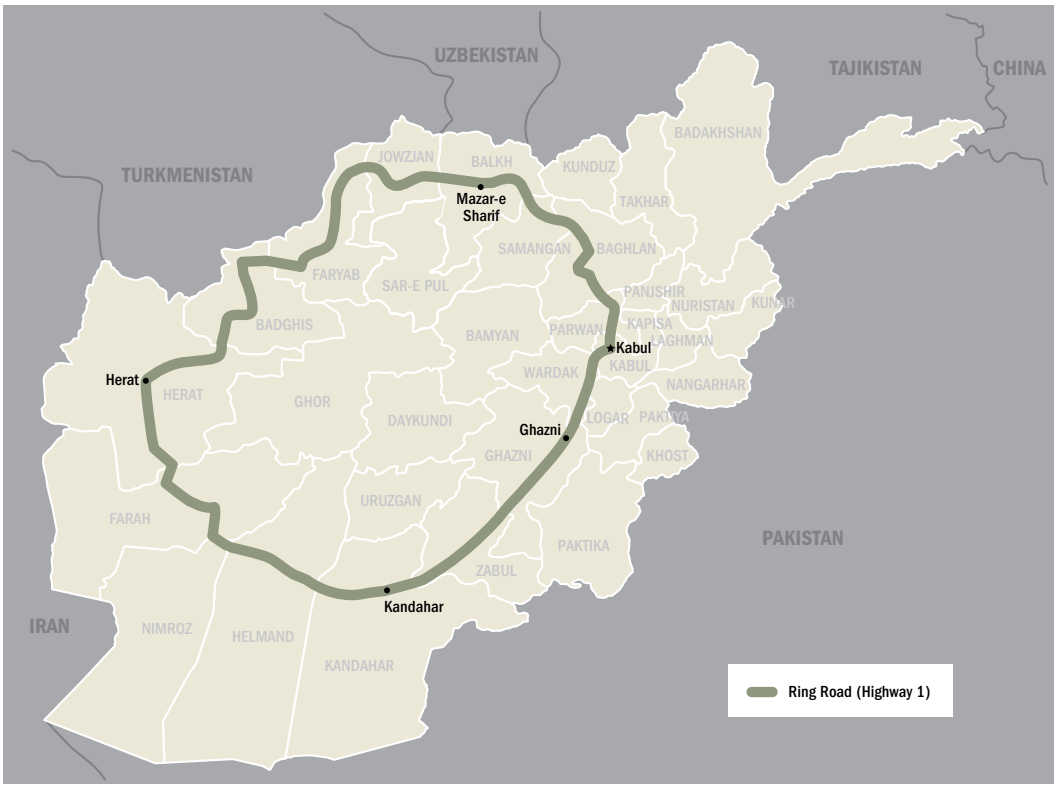
However, despite low funding levels, there was enormous pressure on USAID to demonstrate progress to the Congress, U.S. taxpayers, and the Afghan people.[125] The National Security Council (NSC) decided to prioritize large-scale investments in infrastructure. In 2002, overruling objections by USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios, the NSC tasked the agency with building the Kabul to Kandahar portion of the Ring Road (see Figure 5).[126] A decision to expedite construction in order to complete the work before the 2004 U.S. and Afghan presidential elections required the sacrifice of quality standards.[127]

A perpetual sense of imminent departure reduced the ability of U.S. officials to plan for the long term.

In order to fund the Ring Road, USAID had to slash money from other programs, including agriculture and governance programming.[128] According to a U.S. Treasury

FIGURE 5

THE RING ROAD IN AFGHANISTAN



Source: SIGAR visualization.

USAID road construction efforts along the Khost-Gardez road in March 2010. (USAID photo)

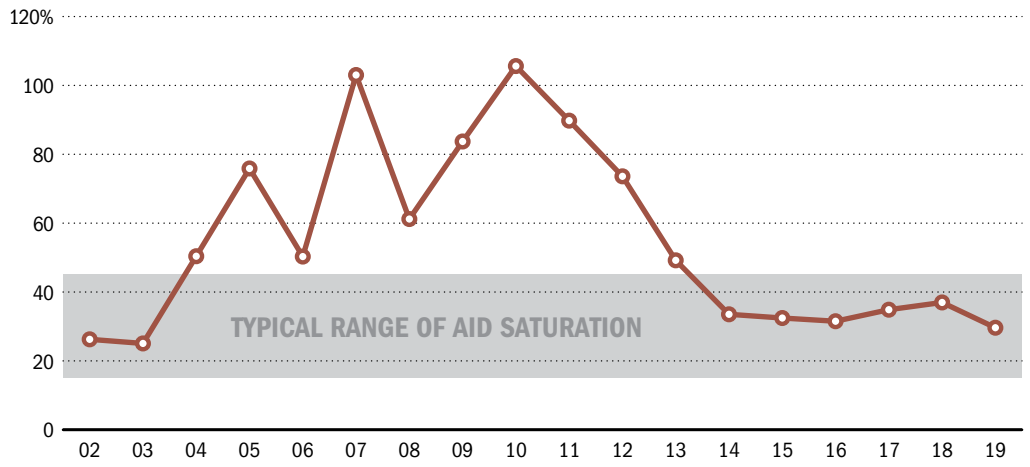
Department memo from late 2002, the focus on the Ring Road meant that "existing [U.S. government] reconstruction projects are on the verge of shutting down due to lack of funds."[129] Thus began a trend that would last for more than a decade: The United States prioritized tangible projects on which money could be spent and success claimed more quickly, over less tangible types of programming with the potential to be more enduring, such as capacity building.[130] In 2002, the United States established its first interagency Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to expand programming outside Kabul. The number of PRTs had increased to 22 by the summer of 2006.[131]

By 2003, the Bush administration had accepted that nation building was unavoidable, and by 2005 it increased reconstruction funding to more than four times what it had been in 2002.[132] By 2004, U.S. reconstruction spending had exceeded an amount equivalent to 45 percent of Afghan GDP, the upper range of a country's theoretical absorptive capacity. While economists and aid experts dispute where this threshold lies (some estimate it to be as low as 15 percent), there is a broad consensus that aid saturation is reached at or below 45 percent of GDP. U.S. funding would remain above that threshold range for another decade (see Figure 6 on the next page).[133]

Absorptive capacity is the amount of international aid that a country can receive before it causes significant economic, social, and political disruptions and becomes counterproductive. Developing countries with fragile economies, such as those experiencing prolonged conflict, are believed to have a lower threshold for aid saturation. International aid above the absorptive capacity threshold can lead to waste, fraud, and increased corruption.[134]

FIGURE 6

U.S.-APPROPRIATED RECONSTRUCTION FUNDING LEVELS AS A PERCENTAGE OF AFGHANISTAN'S GDP



Note: The aid saturation point is the theoretical point at which a state has reached its capacity for absorbing aid. Aid provided beyond that point may be counterproductive. The red line shows U.S. reconstruction funding as a percentage of Afghan GDP over time. The grey area reflects the generally accepted range of aid saturation, typically 15 to 45% of GDP.

Source: SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, October 30, 2014, pp. 226–227; SIGAR, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, January 30, 2021, pp. 172–173; World Bank, "World Development Indicators," World Bank Databank, last updated February 17, 2021, accessed March 3, 2021. For more on the theory of absorptive capacity, see Jonathan Beynon, "Poverty Efficient Aid Allocations: Collier/Dollar Revisited," Overseas Development Institute, ESAU Working Paper no. 2, November 2003, p. 6; Paulo de Renzio, "Increased Aid vs Absorptive Capacity: Challenges and Opportunities Towards 2015," *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 36, no. 3, September 2005, p. 22; Reda Abou Serie, Laban Ayiro, Marlon Breve Reyes, Luis Crouch, George Godia, and Geraldo Martins, "Absorptive Capacity: From donor perspectives to recipients' professional views," prepared under contract for UNESCO, 2009, pp. 5–6.

As spending increased, the United States initially failed to recognize the existential threat that corruption posed to the reconstruction effort, missing an opportunity to make anticorruption efforts a central part of its strategy.[135] The basic assumption was that corruption was created by individual Afghans and that donor interventions were the solution.[136] It would take years for the United States to realize that it was fueling corruption with its excessive spending and lack of oversight.[137]

U.S. agencies made a fateful decision around this time: As funding spiked, they awarded the vast majority of it to contractors to implement programming, correctly determining that the Afghan government lacked the capacity to manage the money directly. (Between 2002 and 2021, U.S. agencies directed only approximately 12 percent of reconstruction assistance "on-budget," through the Afghan government.)[138] They failed to invest equally in building the Afghan government's capacity so that it could eventually assume responsibility for these functions and end its reliance on donor funding and oversight.[139] That the U.S. government was still focused on short-term gains many years into the mission did not seem to alarm U.S. officials. With no political patience for the long way, U.S. agencies identified shortcuts that proved not particularly short and perhaps longer than the long way. Rather than revisit their assumptions when progress proved elusive, U.S. officials concluded that it would be better to power through the shortcut by adding even more money.

USAID and State administered roughly 80 percent of reconstruction funds allocated before 2005, but it became clear that USAID could not spend money as quickly as it was appropriated.[140] As noted in *The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly*, SIGAR's lessons learned report on monitoring and evaluation, the agency suffered from "a constellation of human resource and organizational issues, such as short tours of duty and work overload, which limited institutional memory and effectiveness."[141] Understaffing also undermined program effectiveness at State, where SIGAR found that for oversight staff, "overwhelming responsibilities meant that corners were inevitably cut."[142] Finally, DOD suffered from both insufficient numbers of contract management personnel and a lack of expertise from those that were available.[143]

With no political patience for the long way, U.S. agencies identified shortcuts that proved not particularly short and perhaps longer than the long way.

2006–2008: SPENDING RAMPS UP

Although in early 2002 Afghanistan was considered a post-conflict country, by 2006 it had become apparent that it was not. An ascendant Taliban, a weak central government beset by corruption, and an increasingly disorganized multilateral reconstruction effort prompted the Bush administration to reconsider its initial aversion to a more pronounced U.S. role. As President Bush later recalled, "The multilateral approach to rebuilding, hailed by so many in the international community, was failing." His reluctant conclusion: "America had to take on more of the responsibility."[144] As noted by the RAND Corporation, although Bush eventually moved away from his aversion to extended foreign interventions in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, he did so only slowly, and "remained wary of long-term entanglements."[145]

This reticence was not reflected in funding levels, which generally continued growing, but rather in a refusal to look more than a year or two in the future. U.S. reconstruction spending spiked in 2007 to almost three times what it had been the year before, driven by concerns about increasing insecurity, insurgent activity, and poppy production.[146] Overcorrecting the underresourcing of the first few years, the Congress now put massive pressure on agencies to spend money as quickly as possible. Former NSC "war czar" Douglas Lute described the prevailing ethos as "spend, spend, spend."[147] The NSC and the military also forced USAID to accept impossible goals, driven by political timelines, for how fast it would build things like schools and clinics.[148]

During this period, concerns that too much power was concentrated in the Afghan President's office led the United States to place more emphasis on subnational governance.[149] In order to do so, it relied more heavily on PRTs, which had been established in 28 provinces by 2010.[150] U.S. personnel stationed at PRTs engaged directly with Afghan government officials at the subnational level and funded and contracted

Members of Khost PRT meet with engineers and beneficiaries to discuss an upcoming infrastructure project on May 2, 2010. (DOD photo)

out the projects they identified. This was a way to bypass the Afghan budgetary system, which centralized all power over financial planning and prioritization in Kabul.[151]

As U.S. and coalition military forces tried to get ahead of growing insecurity, the United States turned to rapidly expanding the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces on a condensed training and development timeline. Worried about increasing insecurity, the United States took over responsibility for building the Afghan National Police from the Germans. Then, by threatening to withhold funding, senior U.S. officials forced the Afghan government to agree to increase the size of the police. Likewise, in 2008, just a year after cutting the length of basic training by almost 50 percent, the U.S. and Afghan governments agreed to expand the size of the Afghan National Army—without considering the associated fiscal and resource requirements.[152]

The rapid growth of the force, combined with insufficient donor focus on building capacity in its enablers, stretched logistics to the breaking point. A 2008 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that fewer than one-fourth of police had mentors present to provide training and verify that they were on duty. Meanwhile, the force continued to face shortages of equipment, including vehicles, radios, and body armor.[153] The eagerness to make fast progress created a broader tendency among U.S. officials to overfund and overemphasize improving combat capabilities of the Afghan security services, at the expense of its governing institutions and enablers, such as logistics.[154]

The lack of attention paid to security sector governance meant that corruption ran rampant in the Afghan security forces.[155] An international official recalled that a reformer within the Afghan police whispered to him at the end of a meeting, “Why don’t

you just stop giving us money?"[156] Physical security, political stability, and immediate reconstruction needs took priority over the slow, iterative work of building good governance and the rule of law, including combating corruption. A senior U.S. official recalled the perceived tradeoffs between security objectives and anticorruption, saying that U.S. agencies did not want to aid and abet corruption, but national security was the higher priority. He recalled a pragmatic willingness to work with unsavory powerbrokers in order to pursue U.S. counterterrorism objectives, with the assumption that eventually, the United States would hold the malign powerbrokers to account. That rarely happened, and the problem would only get worse.[157]

2009–2011: AN 18-MONTH SURGE AND A FLOOD OF CASH

After President Obama's January 2009 inauguration, the White House undertook a strategic review of the effort in Afghanistan. Obama was determined to prioritize support for Afghanistan, where attacks and insecurity were spiraling out of control. According to SIGAR's *Stabilization* report:

> Obama personally involved himself in the development of not only a new strategy, but also a new and definitive timeline for the new approach. . . . The president reportedly believed, with good reason, that an open-ended surge would divert critical resources away from mitigating the damage from the 2008 financial crisis; it could give the military more room to pressure the White House into future extensions or escalations; and it could further cultivate Afghan dependency on U.S. aid.[158]

In December 2009, he decided on an ambitious surge of troops and civilians that would pursue a strategy of counterinsurgency and building the capacity of the Afghan government to protect Afghans and expand its reach. At the same time, he limited the surge to 18 months, at which point it would either be successful enough to scale back, or enough of a failure to justify pulling those resources back anyway. As then-commander of U.S. Central Command General David Petraeus later recounted to SIGAR:

> The timeline was just sprung on us. We had no discussion of that during the process. Two days before the president made the [announcement], . . . we all got called and were told to be in the Oval Office that night for the president to lay out what he would announce two evenings later. And he laid it out, there it is. Take it or leave it. He said, we're going to begin the drawdown in the summer of 2011. None of us had heard that before. And we were then asked, are you all okay with that? He went around the room and everyone said yes. And it was take it or leave it. . . . Until that point in the review, nobody ever thought this was going to last forever, but nobody presumed we would begin drawing down in July 2011.[159]

Regardless of how much time the president's advisors were given to react to a time-constrained surge, they all chose to support it rather than highlight the gaps between the evolving strategy's scope, resources, and timeline. Thus, as SIGAR's stabilization report notes, the U.S. government "set in motion a series of events that fostered unrealistic expectations of what could be achieved in a few years and ensured the U.S. government's stabilization strategy would not succeed." Specifically, the

A farmer takes a bag of fertilizer at the Civil-Military Operations Center at Camp Hansen in Marjah District, Helmand Province, on April 25, 2010. (U.S. Marine Corps photo)

compressed timeline "had a profound and harmful impact on countless downstream decisions regarding planning, staffing, and programming."[160]

Despite mounting evidence that the United States had been unable to effectively manage the previous level of funding, reconstruction spending spiked further as U.S. officials scrambled to make the most of the short surge. Spending rose more than 50 percent between 2009 and 2010.[161]

By 2010, U.S. reconstruction spending was equivalent to more than 100 percent of Afghanistan's GDP, or more than double the country's estimated maximum absorptive capacity.[162] "During the surge, there were massive amounts of people and money going into Afghanistan," David Marsden, a former USAID official, told SIGAR. "It's like pouring a lot of water into a funnel; if you pour it too fast, the water overflows that funnel onto the ground. We were flooding the ground."[163] Corruption, which had been endemic prior to the surge, metastasized and swelled to an unprecedented level.[164] In 2010, a State Department cable from Kabul reported Afghan National Security Advisor Rangin Spanta as saying that "corruption is not just a problem for the system of governance in Afghanistan; it *is* the system of governance."[165]

As the pace of spending overwhelmed U.S. systems for ensuring the accountability and effectiveness of its programs, agencies made herculean efforts to increase their staffing. Even so, the pace of implementation still dramatically outstripped management capacity.[166] For example, according to Paul O'Brien, vice president of policy at Oxfam America, internal USAID protocols recommended that each manager oversee roughly $10 million in grants—yet during this period that number reached upwards of $100 million.[167]

Even basic oversight fell to the wayside.[168] Enormous pressure to demonstrate progress to the Congress and the American and Afghan people distorted accountability systems into spin machines. There was little appetite for honest assessments of what worked and what did not.[169] "When you push large amounts of money through and there's no way to pull it back, it creates an incentive for corruption," one former senior U.S. official told SIGAR. "Corrupt actors create ways to bleed the system for all it is worth, because they know the money will keep flowing no matter what they do."[170] Consulting Afghan government officials and project beneficiaries during project design and implementation slowed things down—so U.S. agencies and their contractors often did not bother.[171] By spending money faster than it could be accounted for, the U.S. government ultimately achieved the opposite of what it intended: it fueled corruption, delegitimized the Afghan government, and increased insecurity.[172]

> *"Corruption is not just a problem for the system of governance in Afghanistan; it* **is** *the system of governance."*
>
> —Rangin Spanta, former Afghan national security advisor

A senior NATO official validated then-Afghan President Hamid Karzai's complaints that the international community had created parallel government institutions, telling SIGAR they each "did their own thing . . . without regard to what the [Afghan] government was doing."[173] As a result, the U.S. government too often funded programs that were inappropriate or that exacerbated conflict, and that the Afghan government could not sustain.[174] In 2021, SIGAR audited a sample of 60 U.S. infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, and it found that $723.8 million, or 91 percent, had gone toward assets that were unused or abandoned, were not used as intended, had deteriorated, were destroyed, or some combination of the above.[175]

The United States spent $4.7 billion trying to make district-level governments in contested areas seem responsive to their constituents.[176] However, the United States failed to acknowledge that the districts had no budget to even maintain what had been built, much less continue the work.[177] Worse, with the off-budget donor spigot turned on full blast—directing funds to implementing partners, not the Afghan government—the Afghan government faced no pressure to decentralize its budgetary process, which remains dysfunctional.[178]

The short timeline under which the Obama administration demanded progress by the Afghan National Army resulted in U.S. trainers and advisors filling critical gaps in Afghan capability. In the short term, this made the Army more capable against the Taliban. In the long term, it made Afghan forces dependent on U.S. enablers, such as close air support, medical evacuation, and leadership.[179]

At the same time, the U.S. Army pressured USAID to fund unsustainable programs, often successfully.[180] For example, in 2009, General Stanley McChrystal believed that rapidly

expanding access to electricity would improve the Afghan government's legitimacy. Accordingly, he supported the construction and fueling of two massive diesel generators in Kandahar City, dismissing the Afghan Finance Minister's and USAID officials' objections to the project. The generators provided electricity to approximately 650,000 people out of the province's estimated population of 1 to 2 million with expensive imported fuel.[181] The expectation was that the project would be a "bridging solution" until longer-term power projects could be completed. Although USAID resisted paying for the project, it was ultimately funded by the Afghanistan Infrastructure Fund, which was jointly administered by USAID and the U.S. military.[182] Costs significantly exceeded the revenue generated, and after funding for U.S. fuel subsidies dried up in September 2015, electricity production at the two generators plummeted. The resulting widespread power outages exposed the project as a bridge to nowhere.[183] As of February 2016, only 20 percent of Kandahar City residents had access to electricity.[184]

2012–2014: RAPID TRANSITION TIMELINE REVEALS THE LIMITS OF U.S. EFFORTS

In November 2010 President Obama announced a 2014 withdrawal date for U.S. combat forces and the transfer of security to Afghan forces, which would commence in 2011.[185] As General John Allen, former commander of the International Security Assistance Force, told SIGAR, "We went from an end-state to an end-date."[186] Just as the surge had forced U.S. officials to make the most of the temporary glut of resources, the rapidly approaching 2014 transition created another mad dash. U.S. officials and partners raced to defeat the Taliban, expand the government's reach, and transition on schedule.[187] As during the surge, the transition schedule compelled U.S. and coalition troops and civilian agencies to prioritize areas too insecure for any chance of success. They hopscotched

President Obama speaks with his national security team for Afghanistan and Pakistan issues in the Oval Office on June 25, 2013. (White House photo by Pete Souza)

around the map, clearing an area of insurgents and briefly initiating stabilization programming before moving on to the next clearing operation.[188] Unsurprisingly, the impact of these hasty and superficial interventions rarely lasted longer than the presence of coalition forces. Violence often spiked as soon as troops departed and insurgents reassumed control.[189]

As troop levels began to fall in 2011, so did reconstruction funding.[190] In response, the United States gradually reoriented its programs to the reality that the Afghan government and security forces would have to take over the many functions that donors and their contractors had assumed. By 2014, total reconstruction spending was about 40 percent of its peak from just three years before.[191] This dramatic reduction in spending revealed that the country's GDP growth, which had averaged about 10 percent between 2003 and 2012, had been a mirage; the gains had merely been the result of an overheated wartime economy, and were not sustainable.[192] The International Monetary Fund estimated that all of the jobs that had been created during the surge had been lost by 2016.[193]

Elite capture occurs when economic and political elites divert or steal resources meant for the population.

Afghanistan did not simply revert to its pre-surge state: Donor aid had reworked its power structures. Elite capture had created new grievances and exacerbated old ones, as some groups benefited from the war and others were alienated and driven toward the insurgency. The winners often ran the government for personal gain, and many committed major crimes with impunity, creating a kind of mafia rule.[194] Some became wealthy off U.S. contracts and used their money to buy immunity from prosecution by paying for seats in parliament.[195]

The flood of cash also sabotaged donor efforts to foster economic development. It strengthened the Afghan currency, making imports cheaper, pricing exports out of the market, worsening the trade deficit, and encouraging poppy production. By reducing revenues, these market distortions exacerbated Afghanistan's aid dependence.[196]

"We went from an end-state to an end-date."

—General John Allen

The United States' increased focus on building the capacity of the Afghan government, which had begun in 2010 and 2011, continued in the post-surge period. However, this proved easier in theory than in practice. In reality, the United States still struggled even to implement policies it had adopted years before. For example, years after a 2010 pledge to shift from merely consulting the Afghan government to working through it, USAID's Stability in Key Areas programs, which ran from 2011 to 2015, continued to circumvent the Afghan government in order to do more, quicker.[197] The extreme pressure to demonstrate progress, generally measured by money spent, resulted in shortcuts by the United States and its contractors. By soliciting the Afghan government's input into their projects and then frequently ignoring it, they undermined the goals of building the capacity of the Afghan government and strengthening its legitimacy.[198]

There were, of course, good reasons for the U.S. hesitancy to fund the Afghan government directly. In 2014, for example, SIGAR discovered that bid rigging and corrupt payoffs to Afghan officials had inflated the cost of a $1 billion U.S.-funded Afghan Ministry of Defense issued fuel procurement contract.[199] However, the U.S. decision to keep such a high percentage of its assistance off-budget for so many years allowed it to kick the issue of building the Afghan government's capacity down the road.

2015–PRESENT: COMING TO TERMS WITH REDUCED TROOPS, ASSISTANCE, AND INFLUENCE

The United States' determination to draw down clashed with realities on the ground. The Taliban remained resilient, and the insurgency became emboldened by the drawdown of U.S. and coalition military forces. In 2013, General Joseph Dunford stated, "The gains that we have made to date are not going to be sustainable without continued international commitment. . . . We are not where we need to be yet." Less than a year later, in March 2014, he warned the Senate Armed Services Committee that, upon coalition troops' withdrawal, "the Afghan security forces will begin to deteriorate." He added that "the only debate is the pace of that deterioration."[200]

In 2015, President Obama was forced to change timelines two more times following deliberations with the Afghan government and his national security staff. In March 2015, he announced that the United States would maintain its 9,800 troop strength through the end of 2015 and would transition to a Kabul-based embassy presence by the end of 2016.[201] Then, in October 2015, Obama announced that the United States would halt its military withdrawal from Afghanistan, keep the current force of 9,800 troops in place through most of 2016, and keep thousands in the country through the end of his term.[202]

By 2017, President Trump was inclined to avoid timeline-based drawdowns. In his August 2017 Afghanistan strategy speech, he declared that "conditions on the ground—not arbitrary timetables—will guide our strategy from now on."[203] As a part of this new strategy the Trump administration authorized U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad to begin negotiating directly with the Taliban.[204] In February 2020, the United States and the Taliban finalized an agreement that created a schedule for a complete U.S. withdrawal in exchange for counterterrorism assurances from the Taliban and their commitment to negotiate with the Afghan government on the future of the country.[205]

While declining to anchor the drawdown in a calendar, the Trump administration still continued its predecessor's tendency to draw down troops and resources with little concern for conditions on the ground. Just as the Afghan government and Taliban were about to sit down to begin exploring peace talks, the Trump administration announced it would reduce troops even faster than required, undermining any U.S. leverage that might have been used to motivate the Taliban to negotiate with the Afghan government.[206] With their departure, the number of troops conducting oversight of U.S. security assistance

A U.S. Air Force airman mentors an Afghan National Army military policeman during training at Kabul Military Training Center. (U.S. Air Force photo by Cecilio M. Ricardo, Jr.)

decreased as well, making it harder for them to address dysfunction, lack of capacity, and corruption within the Afghan army and police.

The Trump administration continued its predecessor's tendency to draw down troops and resources with little concern for conditions on the ground.

Meanwhile, by 2021, U.S. funding for Afghan forces—the vast majority of U.S. reconstruction spending—had fallen to its lowest level since 2008.[207] Between the Trump administration's first budget in 2018 and its last in 2021, U.S. funding for Afghan forces fell 36 percent as troops were slowly withdrawn.[208] In April 2021, the Biden administration announced the withdrawal of all U.S. troops, but then requested a funding increase for Afghan security forces to $3.33 billion for fiscal year 2022.[209] Decreasing troop levels while increasing assistance levels is likely to strain the oversight of training and equipping Afghan security forces. Historically, this compels program managers to become preoccupied with more immediate goals, like merely keeping the Afghan government afloat.[210] With oversight capabilities dwindling and $6.68 billion still in the pipeline for Afghanistan reconstruction, the risk of waste, fraud, and abuse is certain to increase.[211]

TIMELINES AND POLITICAL PRESSURE ARE PERENNIAL

Rebuilding Afghanistan was going to be extremely challenging regardless of the approach that the U.S. government and its allies took. However, many U.S. government decisions created a counterproductive cycle: Short-term goals generated short timelines, which created new problems that could only be addressed by more short-term goals. When

none of that worked, the U.S. government developed yet another short-term goal: withdrawing all troops almost immediately, even though it risked depriving the continuing reconstruction mission of the personnel needed to oversee security assistance.

The U.S. government is poor at predicting the resources and length of time necessary to rebuild complex political institutions in other countries. Being poor predictors makes it tempting for policymakers to assume they can effect change via sheer willpower, and to impose timelines or political pressures to rapidly complete a mission that is exceptionally difficult on any timeline. Elected and appointed officials are themselves often under immense pressure, which then cascades onto embattled reconstruction missions. The painstaking work of rebuilding institutions was simply never compatible with the urgency with which the U.S. government perpetually operated in Afghanistan.

This leaves policymakers with a frustrating quandary: Success is only possible on prolonged timelines, and even then it is hardly guaranteed. Political pressure to find quick solutions to problems which defy quick solutions is likely to remain a fixture for all reconstruction efforts. The question is how to mitigate this tendency.

QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- As these missions often grow slowly, what mandates, training, and resources do agencies need in order to plan for long-term efforts to reduce violent conflict, even while those efforts are still small in scale?
- In conflict-affected environments, what funding mechanisms are necessary to allow U.S. agencies to develop flexible plans for programs at least a decade into the future?
- How can the Congress give U.S. agencies the room to plan for long-term engagement, even if policymakers are unsure of their own long-term commitment? What does oversight look like if even low-cost engagements in conflict-affected environments require long-term planning?

Relevant SIGAR Recommendations from Previous Lessons Learned Reports

The Congress may wish to consider creating a long-term private sector development fund to reduce the pressure to use spending levels as a measure of progress and avoid sharp funding fluctuations during reconstruction efforts.[212]

Development assistance programs that aim to incentivize a shift away from illicit drug production should be sustained for more than five years, support farmers' household income diversification, and consider the needs of different socioeconomic groups.[213]

Reintegration efforts, whether pursued through targeted programs or wider development assistance, should support a long-term transition to an alternative livelihood, not just provide short-term assistance.[214]

LESSON 3

Many of the institutions and infrastructure projects the United States built were not sustainable.

CHAPTER 4

SUSTAINABILITY

Members of PRT Kunar prepare to examine a bridge under construction in Marawara District, Kunar Province, in 2005. (Photo by Harold Ingram)

Reconstruction programs are not like humanitarian aid; they are not meant to provide temporary relief. Instead, they serve as a foundation for building the necessary institutions of government, civil society, and commerce to sustain the country indefinitely. Every mile of road the United States built and every government employee it trained was thought to serve as a springboard for even more improvements and enable the reconstruction effort to end. However, the U.S. government often failed to ensure its projects were sustainable over the long term. Each time a costly project goes unused or falls into disrepair, it marks a failure in the reconstruction effort.

Over the past two decades, the problem of sustainability has resulted in billions of dollars of waste for the U.S. government. A 2021 SIGAR report found that the United States has spent nearly $7.8 billion on capital assets in Afghanistan, including buildings, transmission lines and substations, roads and bridges, motor vehicles, and aircraft. Of that total, nearly 31 percent—$2.4 billion—was spent on assets that were not being used as intended, remain unused, or had been abandoned or destroyed.[215] Significant waste was created when U.S.-funded technical advisors to Afghan institutions, under intense pressure to demonstrate short-term progress, took over core functions of the Afghan government and security forces instead of teaching their

skills to their Afghan counterparts.[216] These failures are likely to become even more apparent as donor funding continues to decline and the Afghan government assumes greater responsibility for financing and overseeing the maintenance and operations of donor-funded infrastructure and programming.

POLICIES EMPHASIZE SUSTAINABILITY, BUT PRACTICES FALL SHORT

Over the past 20 years, Congress and U.S. agencies have repeatedly adopted requirements that sustainability be taken into account during program planning and implementation. In practice, these requirements were rarely carried out. In most cases, the political desire to show progress manifested in bureaucratic pressure that outweighed countervailing directives to ensure that progress would last.

In December 2009, the Army updated its policy to require its staff to plan for, assess, and document a project's anticipated sustainability. However, little changed on the ground.[217] USAID followed suit in 2011 with the Administrator's Sustainability Guidance. In recognition of the coalition-wide reorientation to drawing down and the need to leave behind a government that could sustain itself, the guidance required that all projects be aligned with the Afghan government's own National Development Strategy, and that concerns about the Afghan government's fiscal and technical ability to sustain each project be addressed during the planning phase.[218] Six years later, that goal had not been achieved. A 2017 strategic evaluation of USAID's Afghanistan programming described some senior USAID officials expressing the belief that the goal of Afghan-led, sustainable development remained "largely aspirational."[219]

Since 2014, the Congress has repeatedly tried to ensure that reconstruction programming was sustainable by prohibiting any projects that the Afghan government could not continue on their own.[220] In 2017, the National Defense Authorization Act required DOD to conduct independent evaluations of the sustainability of significant programs that funded, trained, and supported foreign militaries around the world. However, SIGAR found in July 2021 that it remains unclear whether the department has done so.[221]

THE AFGHAN GOVERNMENT'S FISCAL AND CAPACITY LIMITATIONS

Another reason for the Afghan government's inability to assume responsibility for many U.S. reconstruction efforts was its own fiscal and capacity limitations. Afghanistan is heavily reliant on donor funding, which totals at least $8.6 billion per year (covering both security and civilian assistance) and finances almost 80 percent of its $11 billion in annual public expenditures.[229] However, the Afghan government often lacked the technical capacity to maintain the assets the United States provided.

Conditioning U.S. Assistance

The U.S. government has sometimes placed conditions on its reconstruction funds to ensure that the Afghan government used the funds responsibly.[222] Conditions can be financial or non-financial, and can involve a reduction of goods provided in-kind, such as fuel.[223]

Although U.S. agencies have claimed some successes through conditionality, such as improving Afghan reporting and procedures, overall these efforts have failed because they lacked credibility.[224] Nothing has been as important to U.S. officials as the survival and stability of the Afghan government, so reforms such as reducing corruption were often secondary. When U.S. officials imposed conditions on aid to incentivize reform, Afghan officials essentially called their bluff, knowing the U.S. government ultimately would not withhold critical assistance that Kabul desperately needed to ensure its survival. Conditions were announced, but not enforced.[225]

For example, there do not appear to be any direct financial consequences to the Afghan government for violating the terms set by the latest mutual accountability framework, the 2020 Afghan partnership framework, which included commitments to democracy and full gender equality.[226] If Afghanistan's strategic importance to the United States decreases after U.S. troops are withdrawn, however, donor-imposed conditionality may become more credible.[227] In fact, if the U.S. grows more willing to enforce them, the conditions tied to its reconstruction funding could become one of the primary means through which it exerts influence in the country.[228]

Afghanistan is far from being the only poor country for whom donors pay a large portion of government expenses.[230] However, U.S. officials sometimes made the problem worse by designing reconstruction programs without regard to the Afghan government's ability to sustain them. In 2008, for instance, USAID awarded a contract for the design and construction of two hospitals in Paktia and Paktika Provinces—a 100-bed provincial hospital in Gardez and a 20-bed district hospital in Khair Khot—for a combined total cost of $18.5 million. The annual operating and maintenance costs of the new hospitals were many times those of the hospitals they were intended to replace.[231] SIGAR found that USAID began construction on the hospitals a year before they even shared the plans with the Afghan Ministry of Public Health.[232]

SIGAR also found that the Afghan government was unable to fund maintenance for the roads that the U.S. constructed—and even if it had the funding, it lacked the technical capacity to do so.[233] For one group of U.S. power sector projects, SIGAR found that the agencies involved failed to even estimate how much operations and maintenance would cost. Unsurprisingly, the Afghan government has proven unable to sustain them.[234]

Further, the Afghan government was uninterested in continuing programs or sustaining infrastructure that it had not prioritized in the first place. The disconnect between

Haji Sayed Fazullah Wahidi, right, the governor of Kunar Province; U.S. Ambassador Hans Klemm, center, the coordinating director of Rule of Law and Law Enforcement; and dignitaries from Kabul cut the ribbon at a newly constructed courthouse in Asadabad, Kunar Province, on May 9, 2011. (State photo by S.K. Vemmer)

U.S. and Afghan priorities was a challenge for USAID's $300 million Stability in Key Areas program, aimed at building the capacity of subnational governance structures within contested districts.[235] The program's governance coordinator, Gulla Jan Ahmadzai, observed:

> The program was initially planned together with the [Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development] but it wasn't well aligned with the Afghan government['s] National Priority Plans to support the main agenda of government stabilization. The program was not a government-driven approach, and didn't consult the local government in the design phase of the program. . . . After the program officially closed, the activities were not that much sustainable. . . . If the program was aligned and linked with [our plans] then it would have larger effect, since government has plans to take care of their priorities.[236]

The United States also provided direct support to private businesses in part to help the Afghan government expand tax revenue and bolster its fiscal capacity. However, this effort also faced sustainability issues. While some of these companies used the financial support and technical assistance to expand their access to markets, other companies became dependent on "free money" to sustain their profitability.[237] A SIGAR report found that the U.S.-funded Kabul Carpet Export Center, established in 2018 to facilitate textile exports, failed to meet its sales, revenue, and job creation targets by wide margins and was "unlikely to generate the sales and revenue needed to sustain operations after USAID funding ceases in June 2021."[238]

U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Latha Caillouette, a PRT Zabul structures engineer, shows contractors erosion control repairs that are needed at a bridge in Shah Joy District, Zabul Province, on March 4, 2011. (U.S. Air Force photo by 1st Lt. Brian Wagner)

POOR MONITORING AND EVALUATION MEANT THE UNITED STATES WAS SLOW TO RECOGNIZE THE MAGNITUDE OF ITS SUSTAINABILITY PROBLEM

The U.S. government struggled with a lack of good information with which to assess the impact and sustainability of its programs. Instead, it filled the void with competing theories and assumptions about what its interventions were achieving. There were a number of reasons for this. Insecurity prevented staff from accessing and evaluating project sites; goals changed over time, making it difficult to assess whether progress had been achieved; performance management plans were either missing or ignored, or they failed to take sustainability into account.[239]

"I'd talk to infantry commanders and ask what they need, and they'd say, 'Turn this money off. We're having to look for people and projects to spend money on.'"

—Former senior USAID official

In an environment where reliable data were hard to get, U.S. agencies tended to focus on overly simplified metrics—such as whether individuals were paid and structures built—rather than the more challenging issue of their impact within the community or the Afghan government's ability to sustain them.[240] In too many cases, the amount of money spent became the main metric for success.[241]

The U.S. Army's Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP), in particular, struggled to move beyond confirming project completion to ascertain whether it was achieving the intended effect. As the budget for the program swelled—rising from $35 million in 2004 to $500 million in 2009—the number of new projects also spiked, with the majority of CERP projects implemented between 2010 and 2012, amid the surge.[242] During this period, the pressure to spend became excessive. A former senior USAID official told SIGAR, "I'd talk to infantry commanders and ask what they need, and they'd say, 'Turn this money off. We're having to look for people and projects to spend money on.'"[243]

As the number of new projects swelled, the capacity for monitoring the impact and sustainability of those projects diminished. A civil affairs officer working on CERP projects in eastern Afghanistan explained: "Ongoing projects took up too much of our bandwidth to pay attention to old projects. We struggled to look at inherited ongoing projects, so we certainly didn't have time to think about inherited closed projects."[244]

SHORT-TERM GOALS VERSUS LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY

U.S. reconstruction officials faced a dilemma: satisfy overwhelming pressure from Congress and agency leadership by focusing on short-term progress, or take the necessary time to work through the Afghan government to ensure it had the capacity to manage any improvements to Afghan institutions and infrastructure. Too often, the answer was the former: Reconstruction programs chose to get things done quickly, often by bypassing the Afghan government via off-budget assistance.[245] As a result, even when programs were able to achieve short-term success, they were often unsustainable because the Afghans who might take the baton were poorly equipped, trained, or motivated to do so.[246]

Off-budget assistance is money managed directly by international partners instead of working through the Afghan government.

On-budget assistance is money provided to the Afghan government to implement reconstruction projects.

On-budget programs with the potential to build capacity within the Afghan government were repeatedly cancelled after the U.S. government became frustrated with the slow pace of progress, the challenges of navigating Afghan politics, and corruption. For example, in 2005, the United States, the UK, and Canada reduced or completely withdrew funding from the Afghanistan Stabilization Program out of frustration with slow progress, poor management, and political infighting within the Afghan government.[247] The 2009 District Delivery Program, a $40 million effort to rapidly deploy Afghan civil servants to districts recently cleared by U.S. and Afghan troops, was cancelled after disbursing only $2.4 million because the Afghan practice of keeping records on paper was slow and cumbersome, and USAID misconstrued the failure to promptly account for expenditures as evidence of corruption.[248] In 2017, in response to allegations of corruption by the senior leadership of Afghanistan's national power utility, USAID moved about half the funding for its Power Transmission Expansion and Connectivity from on-budget to off-budget.[249] This heavy reliance on off-budget programming allowed U.S. officials to plough ahead with short-term goals, unable or unwilling to acknowledge how unsustainable any gains would be.[250]

The reliance on off-budget assistance created a cycle in which the Afghan government could not improve enough to make on-budget funding more attractive—which

Afghan laborers build a new CERP-funded aqueduct system in Khost Province on September 23, 2006. (Photo by S. Sgt. Robert R. Ramon, 345th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

only reinforced the reliance on off-budget assistance.[251] The Afghan government's institutional response was predictable. As one USAID official noted, "The Afghan government had no motive to create their own budget process because the [off-budget] spigot was turned on full force."[252]

> *"The Afghan government had no motive to create their own budget process, because the [off-budget] spigot was turned on full force."*
>
> —USAID official

SIGAR has repeatedly documented the Afghan government's failure to decentralize budgetary authority by creating mechanisms for substantive input from its provincial and district governments.[253] SIGAR's lessons learned report on stabilization noted that U.S. efforts to build Afghan capacity at the district level were unsustainable because those same capabilities did not even exist at the provincial level.[254] Even after the United States recognized this, many USAID programs kept focusing on the district level, in violation of the U.S. government's own strategy.[255] Not only was a district-level focus unsustainable, but the specific districts the United States prioritized were especially unsuitable for that kind of attention. U.S. officials often focused on the most insecure parts of the country, where they knew interventions were least likely to succeed and where there was often little Afghan government presence.[256]

This kind of poor planning sometimes created an extraordinary level of waste. In 2008, DOD spent $549 million to provide the Afghan Air Force with G222 military transport planes, a variation of an aircraft that the U.S. Air Force itself had retired almost 30 years earlier because replacement parts were hard to find.[257] By 2014, DOD again came

Afghan girls attend a science class supported by the Education Quality Improvement Program in Herat. (World Bank photo)

to the same conclusion—and the G222 planes it had delivered to Afghanistan six years earlier were unceremoniously sold for only $40,257, as scrap metal. "We flew members of parliament to Pakistan, and we did airdrop resupply. . . . There was nothing we did not accomplish that first year," said a U.S. Air Force officer familiar with the G222 program. "I think we proved the operational validity of the airplane in Afghanistan. What we couldn't do was sustain it, and that's where we failed."[258]

QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- What tools or assessments do agencies need in order to determine whether a project is sustainable?
- How can agencies change performance evaluations for civilian and military personnel working in contingency environments to reward those who reject unsustainable projects and programs, and instead approve or prioritize sustainable ones?
- How can the Congress motivate U.S. agencies to reject unsustainable programs and projects? How might the Congress reward agencies for spending less than anticipated, especially if the shortfall was caused by a recognition that spending any more would have been unsustainable or counterproductive?

Relevant SIGAR Recommendations from Previous Lessons Learned Reports

DOD should conduct a human capital, threat, and material needs assessment of the host nation and design a force accordingly, with the appropriate systems and equipment.[259]

USAID should continue to closely team with a host nation's local institutions, such as universities, think tanks, and business associations, to provide technical assistance and training tailored to the local environment and its modes of doing business.[260]

To the extent possible, State and USAID should focus market interventions at the industry or sector level, rather than selecting and supporting individual firms.[261]

USAID should require an assessment of the potential impact a development project could have on illicit crop cultivation prior to obligating funds for development programs in major drug-transit or drug-producing countries.[262]

State, DOD, and Justice should consider supporting small, specialized counternarcotics units as a means to build host-nation counterdrug capacity. However, this assistance should be proportional to the willingness and capacity of host-nation leaders to support such units, and should be coordinated with broader U.S. efforts to strengthen political, security, and judicial institutions.[263]

USAID should direct all bureaus providing election assistance around the world to focus more attention on building electoral institutions over the long term, rather than simply helping those institutions prepare for imminent elections.[264]

USAID should prioritize expanding midwifery education programs, including community midwifery schools, in rural areas where there is a shortage of female healthcare providers and access to maternal care is restricted.[265]

LESSON 4

Counterproductive civilian and military personnel policies and practices thwarted the effort.

CHAPTER 5

PERSONNEL

Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team hosts USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah, on April 9, 2010. (USAID photo)

Reconstruction campaigns are enormous undertakings that require ample resources. Although funding can be ramped up easily, it is far harder to identify, train, deploy, and backfill qualified staff to spend that money. This is not simply a question of linking personnel numbers to overall spending; the critical task of interagency and intra-agency coordination in reconstruction campaigns depends on qualified personnel methodically planning together. This is especially true if the country being rebuilt is mired in protracted violent conflict, where the programs in need of oversight and coordination are rapidly evolving and require equally fast adaptation by the U.S. government.

In Afghanistan, the U.S. government did not pay enough attention to the critical role of personnel. As a result, U.S. officials were unable to overcome critical deficiencies created by a recurring inability to get the right people into the right jobs, rapid turnover of the staff they did find, and poor coordination between military and civilian organizations.

PROBLEMS WITH PERSONNEL STRUCTURES WERE WELL KNOWN

Challenges to personnel management in reconstruction missions have been on the radar of the U.S. government since at least the 1990s. Following problematic missions in Panama (1989), Somalia (1993), and Haiti (1994), U.S. officials observed that the interagency reconstruction process was "incomplete and haphazard; there were insufficient civil affairs, engineers, military police for the rebuilding effort; and

interagency cooperation was poor because many of the agencies were excluded from the DOD planning effort."[266] In an effort to correct these missteps, the Clinton administration issued Presidential Decision Directive 56 in 1997 to institutionalize lessons learned from previous complex contingency operations, as well as to provide the framework needed to do so.[267] The directive aimed to synchronize civilian and military agencies' roles in future reconstruction missions to decrease operational redundancy and prevent individual agencies from shouldering unnecessary responsibilities.[268]

Yet the directive did not produce the type of interagency cooperation it intended. Although it was reportedly driving some improvements in interagency organization as of 2000, the NSC officials responsible for overseeing the process were sidelined. At the same time, State's ability to plan had not improved, and there was no evidence that the new process was used during the early stages of the Afghanistan campaign.[269]

The Bush administration's attempt to fix the problem, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq, was the 2005 National Security Presidential Directive 44, which also created personnel systems for staffing reconstruction efforts.[270] One of this directive's chief contributions was creating the role of Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization at State, who would direct the interagency coordination process. However, according to one Brookings analysis, the Bush administration directive "failed to provide the Coordinator with clear authority over other government entities and did not provide the resources necessary to implement the concept."[271] In reality, DOD's exponentially larger budget and human resource reserves allowed it to outpace the proposed reforms at State, and dictate the speed and priorities of the reconstruction process (see Chapter 2).[272] U.S. officials recognized the critical problems hurting U.S. interagency coordination and personnel, but the recognition did not translate into effective measures to address them.

WEAK PERSONNEL STRUCTURES AND FUNDING PREVENTED QUALITY STAFFING

With any large-scale reconstruction effort, large numbers of people are needed to implement, monitor, and guide the various projects that make up the overall mission. The United States approached reconstruction in Afghanistan by first creating and funding reconstruction projects—and only then attempting to locate the individuals needed to carry them out. This method works only if the government can continuously draw upon existing talent pools. Once those pools were depleted for Afghanistan, projects were haphazardly staffed with underqualified workers, allowed to go unmonitored, and, in some cases, were outright abandoned.

In Afghanistan, the United States government repeatedly undertook new projects without first guaranteeing enough personnel resources were available to see them through.[273] At times, shortages in qualified personnel became so pronounced in both civilian and military agencies that hiring standards were lowered in order to keep programs functioning; at one point, a USAID employee noted that the organization was so desperate for additional staff that they were hiring anyone with "a pulse and a master's degree."[274]

A U.S. Army officer and Afghan National Police practice tactical movement as part of the Focused District Development training program at the Kandahar Regional Training Center. (NTM-A photo by David Votroubek)

Thanks to its large supply of reserve staff, the U.S. military is often able to supply enough personnel to keep projects running, although finding properly qualified individuals remains an issue. However, in some instances even the military is unable to meet its staffing obligations. In 2005, for example, the United States committed to both training and equipping the Afghan National Police and the Afghan National Army. To meet these obligations, the U.S. military attempted to put together Police Mentoring Teams, with the idea that each team would be competent and diverse enough to develop capable Afghan security forces. By 2009, the U.S. military projected a need for 635 Police Mentoring Teams, but there were only enough personnel to sustain 90 teams, and many of those remained understaffed.[275]

The severe lack of personnel also creates budgetary problems: Without enough oversight staff, it was impossible to properly validate data from the field. For instance, a SIGAR audit from January 2015 reported that Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A), which oversaw the training and equipping of Afghan forces, was unable to provide sufficient staff to verify Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police attendance data. This gap allowed corrupt officials to artificially increase their payroll numbers, leading to "ghost soldiers"—nonexistent personnel created to draw a salary.[276] Because CSTC-A was unable to verify employment rates, the SIGAR audit warned that more than $300 million a year was spent paying salaries to nonexistent personnel in the Afghan security forces.[277]

State and USAID faced even greater personnel challenges and were forced to pull staff from other assignments.[278] Because civilian agencies lack the strategic reserves of qualified employees that the military enjoys, they had to hire many staff quickly to meet demand. According to State, the number of civilian personnel at the U.S. embassy in Kabul more than tripled between 2009 and 2011. By the end of 2011, more than 20 percent of

all USAID personnel stationed overseas were working in Afghanistan—and the agency was still falling short of meeting the U.S. government's average ratio of dollars spent per contracting oversight officer.[279] According to a study by Princeton University, the chronic staffing shortage was driven by a hiring freeze at both USAID and State in the mid-1990s, which created a ripple effect that deprived both agencies of the deeply experienced personnel needed to effectively manage contingency operations in later decades.[280]

When neither civilian or military personnel were available to report on the progress of various reconstruction efforts, the amount of money being spent on various projects became synonymous with the amount of progress being made.[281] This hurt program quality and thinly stretched oversight personnel. For example, in 2010, State instructed USAID to double the budget of an agricultural program in southern Afghanistan, requiring the agency to spend $300 million in two provinces in a single year. USAID argued that "such large sums would prove ineffective and wasteful" due to the agency's inability to monitor where and how the money would be spent. Their objections were ignored, due to intense pressure to make progress on short timelines (see Chapter 3).[282]

By the end of 2011, more than 20 percent of all USAID personnel stationed overseas were working in Afghanistan.

The inability of U.S. government agencies to properly oversee their own projects produced poor results in critical project areas, as various staffers were assigned jobs for which they had little to no training or qualifications.[283] Some police advisors were helicopter pilots and received little formal training in policing.[284] The training many military advisors did receive was not even Afghanistan-specific.[285] With such a training deficiency, some police advisors turned in desperation to television shows like "Cops" and "NCIS" to become more familiar with policing.[286]

When the U.S military recognized in 2009 that it did not have enough civil affairs teams to build infrastructure in contested Afghan communities, it tried to mass-produce these teams by taking chemical warfare response units and giving them four-week-long PowerPoint trainings, with poor results.[287] For example, according to one senior U.S. military official overseeing these projects nationwide, many project proposals written by these new civil affairs teams contained justifications that were copied and pasted from one another. Another senior military officer told SIGAR that some justifications even included references to "sheikhs," indicating they were being copied from proposals written in Iraq.[288]

U.S. Special Operations Forces took similar shortcuts. U.S. Navy SEALs and U.S. Marine Forces Special Operations Command personnel who specialize in capture/kill raids were assigned to help build the Afghan Local Police, a task that would normally be the exclusive remit of the U.S. Army's Special Forces. SIGAR found that U.S. Special Operations Forces often struggled with the critical community engagement aspects of building indigenous police embedded in communities.[289]

Afghan contractors unload bags of fertilizer for distribution to residents in Nawa, Helmand, on October 13, 2009. (DOD photo by L. Cpl. Jeremy Harris, U.S. Marine Corps)

RAPID TURNOVER REDUCED PERSONNEL QUALITY

Compounding these general staffing issues, short tours of duty for both military and civilian personnel undermined institutional memory and programmatic continuity in Afghanistan. These tours, typically lasting less than a year for both civilian and military positions, limited the ability of staff to build a nuanced understanding of their role, their environment, and the Afghans they worked with. By the time they found their bearings and built important relationships, they began preparing to depart.[290] With personnel taking critical information with them as they rotated out, the reconstruction effort essentially experienced an annual lobotomy, as newly arriving staff made the same mistakes as their predecessors.[291]

With such a training deficiency, some police advisors turned in desperation to television shows like "Cops" and "NCIS" to become more familiar with policing.

This had a predictable negative effect on the quality of U.S. programs. For example, civilian staffing for rebuilding Afghanistan's private sector was stymied by the need "to do more frequent recruiting from an increasingly limited pool of qualified applicants, raising the probability of delayed activities when positions were not filled." A lack of candidates was often addressed by reassigning unqualified staff members to positions as they were vacated, further contributing to the lack of institutional memory in both civilian and military organizations.[292]

Similarly, perpetual cycles of new employees disrupted the monitoring and evaluation of programs, and created redundancies in the military's supply chain. In one instance in 2013, incoming personnel at CSTC-A requested $195.2 million for specialized military cargo trucks on behalf of the Afghan National Army, unaware that the White House and the National

Security Council had already approved an identical request placed by their predecessors. Under pressure to allocate funds quickly and without knowing they were duplicating an already-filled order, CSTC-A personnel went ahead and procured the trucks anyway, even though the Afghan government did not need them. A similar event occurred in 2016 when a new rotation of CSTC-A personnel submitted a request for ammunition without realizing their predecessors had already determined such an order was unnecessary.[293]

With personnel taking critical information with them as they rotated out, the reconstruction effort essentially experienced an annual lobotomy as newly arriving staff made the same mistakes as their predecessors.

To address this constant turnover, the United States employed contractors to work both alongside and independently from U.S., Afghan, and coalition forces. Driven in part by a political climate which favored increased project spending over recruiting and training more U.S. personnel, the demand for more staff became so great between 2008 and 2011 that contractors eventually made up more than 40 percent of DOD's non-combat workforce in Afghanistan.[294]

THE USE OF CONTRACTORS AND PARTNERS PROLIFERATED TO FILL GAPS

Contractors provided a diverse collection of support activities, from weapons systems maintenance to linguistics, allowing the U.S. government to meet the demands of a rapidly growing reconstruction mission.[295] Contractors could also travel to field locations which were deemed too dangerous for U.S. government employees.[296] The number of government staff was inadequate to supervise the large number of contractors overseen by DOD, State, and USAID, particularly considering the size of the programs compared to those in other countries. According to a 2011 Government Accountability Office report, the shortage was so severe that merely finding people to vet new contractors was itself a difficult task, let alone finding people to monitor the contractors once they had been selected.[297]

Because contract work was often performed with little to no oversight, waste and fraud often went virtually unchecked. In 2012, GAO reported that a number of new, contractor-built facilities had to be repaired or completely rebuilt because oversight personnel were unable to adequately measure contractors' performance, resulting in "wasted resources, low morale, and risks to safety of base and installation personnel where the deficient guard towers, fire stations, and gates were constructed."[298] The report detailed a number of instances in which contracting officers failed to properly evaluate new structures due to a lack of technical expertise and time. In one such instance, a $2.4 million compound could not be used because it was built outside the security perimeter of the base it was commissioned for. Contracting officials attributed the error to a lack of time and personnel needed for oversight.[299]

U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Col. William McCollough, second from right, commander of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, talks with members of the USAID team at Patrol Base Jaker in Nawa District, Helmand Province, on August 16, 2009. (DOD photo by S. Sgt. William Greeson, U.S. Marine Corps)

MILITARY AND CIVILIAN PERSONNEL FACED RECURRING COORDINATION CHALLENGES

Coordination between civilian agencies and the military was critical to the U.S. government's efforts at rebuilding Afghan institutions. Reducing poppy cultivation, reintegrating ex-combatants into society, building the private sector, and convincing Afghans to trust their government all depended on the coalition's ability to divide labor at the strategic and tactical levels. However, clashes were abundant, often due to personnel issues. As detailed in Chapter 2, DOD's resources and staffing far exceed those of State and USAID, both in Afghanistan and globally, which in practice puts DOD in charge by virtue of its capabilities. At the height of the Obama administration's troop surge, for example, a total of 99,800 U.S. military forces were stationed in Afghanistan, compared to just under 600 USAID personnel.[300] Although a variety of civilian agencies contributed personnel to the mission in Afghanistan, combined staff numbers never came close to approaching the military labor force, despite the overtly political nature of the reconstruction mission.

This mismatch in resources often elevated military objectives over civilian ones. Senior officials at USAID described to SIGAR how they were often "bulldozed" by the military into implementing projects in places far too dangerous for them to have a stabilizing effect (see Chapter 6).[301] Civilian officials had little recourse. They were dependent on the military for food, housing, and transportation, and there might only be one civilian official embedded with an entire battalion or brigade.[302] Arbitrary timelines, either implicit or explicit, often compounded the problem, as the military was less likely to consider civilian objectives if troops were under intense pressure to make fast progress, as detailed in Chapter 3. Rather than working with their civilian counterparts to identify which areas were suitable for interventions, military officials prioritized their own goals: After all, they controlled

transportation between sites. This dictated the kind of intervention, limited its prospects for success, and prevented interventions in areas more likely to respond favorably.[303]

As DOD insisted on taking the lead in the provinces, civilian agencies either resisted or were unable to keep up even when they tried to, which convinced DOD that civilian agencies were not "nimble or capable enough to effectively support private sector development" in insecure environments.[304] What emerged was a self-perpetuating cycle. Civilian agencies needed to hire additional partners to keep pace with the projects deemed acceptable by the military; when the agencies could not effectively monitor the work being done, the ensuing waste and fraud drove the military to request even more programs. These programs would then also go understaffed or without supervision. In this way, the United States continuously spent money and engaged in more projects without seeing proportionate returns on its efforts.

PERSONNEL QUALITY IS CRITICAL IN RECONSTRUCTION MISSIONS AND IS BEST ENSURED BY BUILDING INSTITUTIONS BETWEEN THESE MISSIONS

For two decades in Afghanistan, the U.S. government continuously struggled to identify the right personnel, train them properly, keep them in the country long enough to become effective, and enable them to spend enough time with their replacement to hand over their work before departing. State and USAID in particular struggled to staff their programs with qualified personnel. Civilian agencies simply could not compete with DOD's resources and planning in the provinces. DOD ended up making critical decisions that should have been made by U.S. civilian officials with expertise in navigating complex political dynamics.

Given the dearth of robust personnel structures that were necessary to successfully scale up a reconstruction effort, it is difficult to imagine how U.S. officials could have performed any better. The problem was not that they were poor at improvising, but that the U.S. government believed it could achieve its goals through improvisation at all. As is apparent across the Afghan government, it takes decades to build effective institutions, and those of the U.S. government are no different. Laying the groundwork for personnel to be trained and bureaucratically positioned for a scaled reconstruction campaign is a particularly difficult institutional challenge, and one that may be best implemented long before a reconstruction campaign begins.

QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- How can DOD improve the way it recruits, trains, deploys, and tracks its staff that train and equip host nation security forces? How can DOD better institutionalize such expertise?
- What changes to the budgets of State and USAID would be necessary to create personnel structures that would enable them to staff reconstruction missions and conflict-related crises? As the U.S. commitment to a reconstruction mission grows,

what attributes would these personnel structures need to already have to ensure they can grow in a way that does not substantially hurt the quality of staffing?

- How can State and USAID improve their ability to recruit, train, and retain qualified personnel when they need to increase the number of staff in a conflict-affected country? What reforms do they need to implement now in anticipation of those recruitment, training, and retention challenges?

Relevant SIGAR Recommendations from Previous Lessons Learned Reports

DOD and USAID should prioritize developing and retaining human terrain analytical expertise that would allow a more nuanced understanding of local communities.[305]

DOD should ensure it has a sufficient number and mix of civil affairs personnel with the right training and aptitude for the next stabilization mission.[306]

State and USAID should designate a new civilian response corps of active and standby civilian specialists who can staff stabilization missions.[307]

DOD, State, USAID, Treasury, Justice, and the intelligence community should increase anticorruption expertise to enable more effective strategies, practices, and programs in contingency operations.[308]

USAID should develop and retain staff with expertise in gender mainstreaming, to better integrate gender into the agency's programming.[309]

State and USAID should review human resource policies to make them more suitable for conflict environments, ensure continuity, and maintain institutional knowledge.[310]

DOD, State, and other key security assistance stakeholders should enhance civilian and military career fields in security sector assistance, and create personnel systems capable of tracking employee security sector assistance experience and skills to expedite the deployment of these experts.[311]

The U.S. military should create a clear career path for combat advisors and continue to provide incentives to improve recruitment. Part of this career path should include post-deployment assignments at security sector assistance commands and U.S. military training centers.[312]

DOD should diversify the leadership assigned to develop foreign military forces to include civilian defense officials with expertise in the governing and accountability systems required in a military institution.[313]

State, USAID, and DOD should each designate an existing office to lead and advise on reintegration matters. These offices should develop in-house expertise on international best practices on the socioeconomic, political, and military aspects of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration processes.[314]

LESSON 5

Persistent insecurity severely undermined reconstruction efforts.

CHAPTER 6

INSECURITY

Private security contractors protect the construction of the Khost-Gardez road, on March 30, 2010. (USAID photo)

For two decades, insecurity has been an urgent problem in Afghanistan for the United States, the international community, and the Afghan government.[315] Insecurity has undermined political processes, the extension of government services, and innumerable economic and development programs—all of which were, in theory, meant to reduce insecurity. It has helped hollow out even the most direct and practical efforts to counter its effects, such as the development of competent Afghan security forces and programs meant to draw reconcilable insurgents back into the fold of Afghan society.

UNDERMINING THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

The U.S government has spent many years trying to help Afghanistan hold credible elections in the belief that doing so would produce legitimate government officials.[316] However, SIGAR found that poor security has critically undermined the electoral process and the legitimacy of its elected officials.

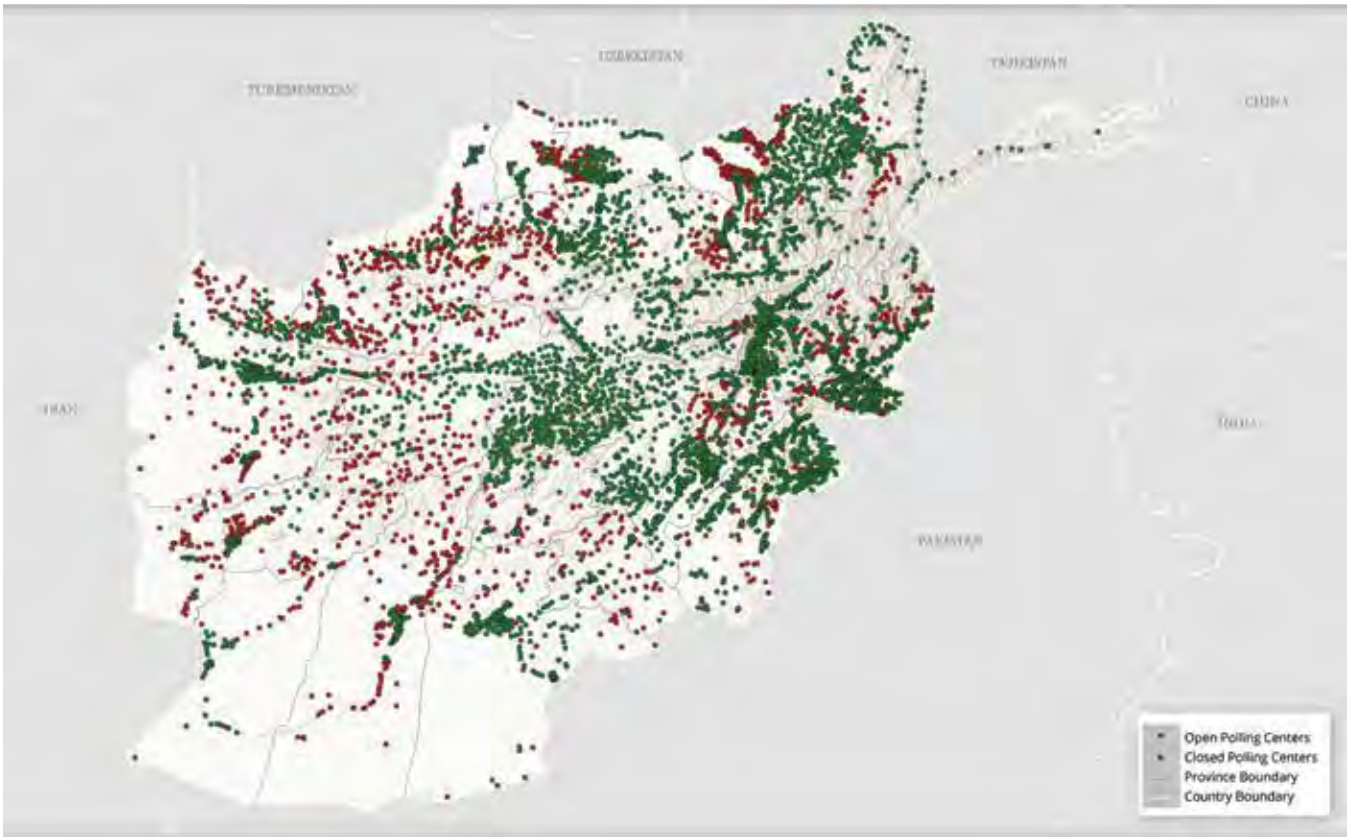
The electoral process comprises a sequence of critical events, each of which are essential to the integrity of the election. While some of the more centralized events may be easier to protect, geographically dispersed events are more vulnerable to disruption: SIGAR has found that insecurity has hamstrung both voter registration and the establishment and operation of polling centers throughout Afghanistan.[317] During the

2018 parliamentary election, for example, there was a clear correlation between the level of government control and the number of open polling stations by district.[318] The effects that insecurity had on the Afghan democratic process were likely worse during the 2019 presidential election, when more than 37 percent of polling stations were deemed too dangerous to open (see Figure 7). It was the most shuttered election in Afghan history.[319]

Meanwhile, polling centers that are operational on election day are sometimes inaccessible to election observers, who serve as the watchdogs of the democratic process. Even in locations that are accessible to observers, the threat of violence sometimes stymies their efforts to observe and document fraud.[320] In addition to observers, the insecure environment has also affected voting behavior, as reflected in the clear correlation between lower turnout and fear for personal safety in the 2018 election.[321] Downward trends in both the number of operational polling centers and voter turnout are troubling signs for the country as it struggles to maintain its democratic moorings.[322]

FIGURE 7

PLANNED POLLING CENTERS FOR 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, BY STATUS



Note: SIGAR obtained separate lists of polling centers from sources within or associated with the Independent Election Commission. Some just had numbers, others had names and districts of polling centers (some of which indicated the open/closed status of each), while others included the actual military grid reference system coordinates for the polling centers. SIGAR cross-referenced them all to identify locations of polling centers and their status for 2018 and 2019. In 2019, the Independent Election Commission planned to open 5,373 polling centers and to close 2,044 centers. However, the UN says that 689 additional security-based closures took place shortly before Election Day 2019, the locations of which are unknown to SIGAR and are not depicted in this map.

Source: Independent Election Commission, various polling center location spreadsheets, 2018 and 2019.

Matthew Flynn, USAID field program officer and head of the Kandahar City stabilization cell, and other members of PRT Kandahar visit the Shur Andam Industrial Park in Kandahar City on June 11, 2011. (U.S. Air Force photo by Ch. M. Sgt. Richard Simonsen)

OBSTRUCTING THE EXTENSION OF GOVERNMENT

Beyond the democratic process, insecurity also undermined efforts to legitimize the government through service delivery programs. According to the U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide, "The perceived capacity of local government to provide for the population is critical to national government legitimacy."[323] These programs were highly vulnerable in insecure environments.

These challenges were exemplified by Key Terrain Districts, strategically important areas of the south and east, most of which had limited or no government presence. During the surge of 2009–2012, the U.S. channeled personnel and resources into these districts with the hope that securing them would have a "cascading effect" throughout the country.[324] As it turned out, some districts were so volatile that the coalition was perpetually trying to secure them, and could never properly deliver the services that stabilization and counterinsurgency demanded. In one case, a senior USAID official described to SIGAR how poor security prevented him from simply visiting a road construction project:[325]

> The military asked us to build a 38-kilometer road in Arghandab, Kandahar, and five kilometers in, our implementing partner told us it's not safe enough to go further. The military asked why we stopped, so we all flew out there to take a look, and it was so insecure that our landing zone was under fire and we had to turn back. Think about that. We were supposed to build roads in an area so dangerous that armed U.S. military helicopters could not even land nearby.[326]

Naturally, the growth and maturation of the Afghan government—the theoretical linchpin of the strategy and the basis for an eventual U.S. withdrawal—required local Afghan officials. For many years, the U.S. government ran programs to recruit, train,

and pay the salaries of these local officials so they could provide services and thereby legitimize the role of the Afghan government.[327] However, these local officials were easy targets for the insurgency, which at the height of the U.S. troop surge reportedly managed to assassinate an average of one Afghan official every day. The insurgents' assassination campaign also gave informal powerbrokers cover to assassinate local rivals serving as government officials. The high levels of violence against local officials made it difficult to recruit qualified candidates, and had a chilling effect on the willingness of those who were hired to leave the security of provincial capitals.[328]

While the United States favored an aggressive strategy that prioritized population centers or key infrastructure that was controlled or contested by insurgents, their Afghan counterparts argued for areas that could be held for the long term.[329] Perhaps as a consequence, the Afghan government took a more cautious approach with their own stabilization programming. The Citizens' Charter Afghanistan Project, for example, which issued small development grants to communities via informal representatives, limited the geographic scope of the program in recognition of Afghan security forces' limited ability to protect beneficiaries. Citizens' Charter would initially decline to operate in the third of Afghanistan's districts that were deemed too insecure, much like its long-running predecessor, the National Solidarity Program, which eschewed highly insecure areas of southern Afghanistan.[330] The National Solidarity Program reportedly influenced U.S. project design, but its aversion to insecure districts was reportedly lost on U.S. policymakers, who attempted to implement development projects in some of the most volatile corners of the country.[331] Barna Karimi, the deputy minister of Afghanistan's Independent Directorate of Local Governance, described to SIGAR the challenges that Afghan counterparts faced in even accessing projects in insurgent hotbeds:

> When I had disagreements with the Americans about Helmand, it was because before going to stabilize a district close to Lashkar Gah, for example, Nawa, they used to go to a further district like Garmser and start operations there. After the military operation in Garmser was finished, they started shouting, "We cleared Garmser, so come here and establish the government administration." I used to tell them that I am not coming, because I cannot travel there by the road. "You are going there by helicopters," I would say. "I cannot take all my staff there by plane. How is my clerk able to go through Nawa to get there? He will be kidnapped on his way in Nawa. How are you going to prevent this?"[332]

In an interview with SIGAR, one USAID official seemed to suggest that the very idea that improved security would flow from development in highly insecure areas was flawed. Rural Afghans "didn't feel like their government could protect them, and we couldn't change that no matter how much we built, how many people we employed, or how much they liked us for it," the official said.[333] Similarly, SIGAR has reported that in some cases, community leaders requested permission from the Taliban to allow U.S.-sponsored programs to proceed, essentially granting the insurgency veto power over stabilization projects.[334] In fact, insecurity sometimes caused projects to backfire. Echoing SIGAR's findings, one large USAID evaluation revealed that these projects sometimes decreased support for the government and increased support for the Taliban.[335] Projects often

attracted violent attacks by insurgents keen on discrediting them. When the government was unable to prevent this from happening, disillusionment with government grew more than if there had not been any intervention in the first place.

RESTRICTING COUNTERNARCOTICS EFFORTS

Over the last two decades, the problems of insecurity and the narcotics industry have exacerbated one another in ways that stymied U.S. efforts to reduce both. Poppy is an attractive insurance policy for farmers caught in the middle of a war. The crop is lightweight, easy to transport, lucrative, and it can be stockpiled to await more favorable market or security conditions.[336] Yet the cultivation and trafficking of opium poppy is as much a contributor to insecurity as it is a response to it. As journalist Steve Coll observed:

> Perhaps it was not that opium caused war. Perhaps it was war that caused opium. . . . Since the 1980s, there had been a self-reinforcing cycle in the opium belt: War created desperation, which made opium attractive for poor farmers, which created profits for warlords, who then used those resources to fight for greater wealth and power, which created more desperation for poor farmers.[337]

The U.S. government has spent nearly $9 billion on counternarcotics efforts since 2002, in part due to concerns that narcotics trafficking funded Taliban activities.[338] Despite the investment, the cultivation of opium poppy in Afghanistan has trended upward for two decades, and insecurity has made it difficult to reverse the growth.[339] Poppy cultivation was often concentrated in areas under the control of insurgents, so physically accessing areas to eradicate the crop or interdict it as it was being moved or processed into heroin proved challenging.[340] Many U.S. and Afghan security forces, Afghan civilians, U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agents, and contractors were killed or wounded in the course of counternarcotics-related missions.[341] Even successful interdiction efforts and reductions in cultivation were often only possible under the protection of significant coalition and Afghan security forces, who were never in a position to stay in targeted areas indefinitely as a deterrent. Thus, many of these gains proved temporary and unsustainable, particularly as the coalition gradually drew down across the country.[342]

Rural Afghans "didn't feel like their government could protect them, and we couldn't change that no matter how much we built, how many people we employed, or how much they liked us for it."

—USAID official

Moreover, as one SIGAR lessons learned report noted, violence in contested areas "disrupted economic activity by preventing access to markets and destroying infrastructure that could otherwise help people pursue livelihoods in the licit economy."[343] As it turned out, the larger U.S. effort to grow the economy amid such violence was equally challenging.

HINDERING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The U.S. government has tried to use foreign development assistance to advance security objectives throughout its modern history, and U.S. efforts in Afghanistan have been no exception.[344] One potential avenue to victory that the United States explored in Afghanistan was the cultivation of the country's stunted private sector. The theory that economic development would bolster security rested on three assumptions: economic growth would legitimize the state; tax revenue would enable the state to deliver services; and reducing the ranks of the unemployed would shrink the pool of potential insurgents.[345] U.S. economic initiatives included "providing technical and financial support to individual small and medium enterprises; encouraging businesses [that] added value to primary commodities and products; . . . promoting foreign and domestic direct investment; encouraging regional trade; [and] providing vocational training and education."[346]

As it turned out, the Afghan economy did experience growth over the course of American involvement there—but that growth did not translate into substantial reductions in unemployment or poverty, as the original theory of change predicted.[347] The projects that aimed to spur economic growth and foster a more secure environment were undermined by the very symptoms of insecurity that they were meant to treat. The constant threat of violence inevitably affected the motivations and confidence of Afghans starting and running businesses, to say nothing of foreign companies considering investment.

From 2002 onward, the international community prioritized regional integration between Afghanistan and its neighbors in Central and South Asia as a way of increasing Afghanistan's economic growth.[348] One high-profile regional project that was conceived even before the U.S.-led invasion, known as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, was dogged by security concerns for years.[349] A similarly ambitious regional telecommunications system that would place Afghanistan at the center of a fiber optic network—part of which would run in parallel to TAPI—has also been beset with security concerns.[350] The story of these projects is not unique: The success of a number of other regional initiatives with neighboring countries, on trade, transportation, and economic cooperation, has also been limited by insecurity.[351] In these cases, insecurity at the local level has helped disrupt planning and implementation of grand regional plans for economic and political stability.

It is intuitive that geographically dispersed soft targets like pipelines and fiber optic networks could be easily disrupted in an environment like Afghanistan, but even more concentrated projects have been scuttled by insecurity. Large-scale mining operations, for example, were given a prominent role in plans for Afghanistan's economic future; extractives have often been touted as the country's greatest economic hope. Yet even these critical, seemingly defensible projects have faltered. Two of the most promising projects—the Aynak copper mine in Logar Province, and Hajigak iron mine in Bamyan Province—were not even located in the most insecure corners of the country, yet they were stifled by insecurity.[352] Aynak, for example, was targeted by a car bomb in 2008; a mine clearing operation was attacked there in 2012; and 19 Afghan National Police were killed in a battle at the mine in 2020.[353]

Women working in a garment factory in Kabul in January 2014. (Asian Development Bank photo by Jawad Jalali)

The development of mines and their ancillary infrastructure, like roads and railways, require significant foreign private investment, but insecurity and the uncertainty that it spawns have made Afghanistan one of the worst places in the world to do business.[354] Foreign direct investment in Afghanistan has been limited, despite the fact that encouraging such investment was a key component of U.S. economic development efforts.[355] The United States spent approximately $488 million to support Afghanistan's mining sector, including $51 million on a minerals support program implemented by DOD's Task Force for Business and Stability Operations, which promoted investment in various industries and sectors of the Afghan economy.[356] Ultimately, SIGAR would identify insecurity as one of the critical reasons that private sector investment initiatives struggled to succeed in Afghanistan.[357] As the security outlook for the country dimmed, so did the level of investment.[358]

While the inhospitable business climate meant that foreign investors were reluctant to lend, Afghan banks that were born of insecurity had fewer reservations, relying on "extrajudicial" and "nonconventional enforcement methods" to collect loan payments. Up to one-third of bank staff were composed of security personnel.[359] In other words, the same insecurity that foreign investors found prohibitive actually shaped the practices and composition of domestic financial institutions, and may have essentially rendered them participants in the country's insecurity.

In contrast, U.S. efforts to cultivate the Afghan economy were apparently unable to adapt many of their operations to the insecure and unconventional environment. As the insurgency spread and security deteriorated across the country, constraints on U.S. mobility and physical access to project locations became more serious.[360] Those restrictions affected everything from the implementation and monitoring of projects, to accessing information necessary to vet grant recipients, and building relationships with local partners.[361] Like SIGAR, other watchdog agencies—including the Government

Accountability Office—have pointed out how poor security and the resulting restrictions on freedom of movement limited project monitoring and increased the risk of waste, fraud, and mismanagement.[362]

Two of the most promising mining operations—the Aynak copper mine in Logar Province, and Hajigak iron mine in Bamyan Province—were not even located in the most insecure corners of the country, yet they were stifled by insecurity.

As security deteriorated and the U.S. focus shifted to a more deliberate counterinsurgency program, certain aspects of the economic development agenda were repurposed to conform to the new operational focus. One example of this was the Afghanistan Small and Medium Enterprise Development project, which shifted from a focus on developing certain value chains and sectors of the country's economy to a circumscribed focus on development in military-designated Key Terrain Districts.[363] This process of cannibalizing an economic development program to support the counterinsurgency effort represents a vexing tradeoff for policymakers and implementers on the civilian side of the effort, and mirrored difficult choices that were made on the military side in the name of security.

CONSTRAINTS ON BUILDING INDIGENOUS SECURITY FORCES

The initial U.S. military operations against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the wake of the 9/11 attacks were in partnership with independent militia forces, many of whom had previously committed abuses against their fellow Afghans.[364] Some of these same militia commanders and their ranks were later brought into the government and security forces, where they engaged in predation and ultimately undermined the development of the Afghan National Army and Police.[365] In fact, Afghan militias allied with the United States were sometimes direct sources of insecurity, even after the United States attempted to formalize them by inducting their members into various policing programs.[366]

Such formalization efforts were just one of the ways coalition forces and the Afghan government attempted to find a shortcut to a more secure Afghanistan. At several points over the last two decades, rising insecurity also forced policymakers to accept problematic compromises in the development of the country's official uniformed security forces. Initially, in 2002, plans called for a transition from a large aggregate of militias who had helped topple the Taliban to a smaller, professionally trained force. Then deteriorating security and threats emanating from Pakistan led to more ambitious plans for a standing army.[367] SIGAR found that after levels of insurgent violence skyrocketed in 2006, decisions about the size and capabilities of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces were made almost exclusively in relation to countering violence and insecurity. As a consequence, the U.S. military's "gold standard" training program fell by the wayside.[368] As the target strength of the Afghan National Army increased, for example, the duration of standard training decreased, from 14 weeks

U.S. Army military police officer teaches Afghan National Police members in Logar Province about improvised explosive devices. (DOD photo by De'Yonte Mosley)

in 2005 to 10 weeks in 2007.[369] That same year, senior Afghan and U.S. officials agreed to an even more ambitious plan to expand the size and capabilities of the Afghan military, transforming it from light infantry to a combined arms force, imposing additional training requirements on a process that was already making significant compromises.[370]

In some cases, insecurity appears to have also affected retention among Afghan military personnel. Instances of Afghan military trainees going absent without leave (AWOL) in the United States increased during periods of heightened violence in Afghanistan, and personal safety concerns were reportedly the leading motivation for fleeing within the United States.[371] In Afghanistan, retention was a major challenge for the ANDSF, with one estimate suggesting that Afghan National Army attrition stood at 2 percent per month, or roughly 24 percent per year in the mid-to-late 2000s. By 2020, Afghan security forces were still replacing a quarter of the force annually, which the U.S. military has come to view as normal. Solders going AWOL was one of the challenges driving those elevated attrition rates.[372]

Meanwhile, the high levels of violence and insecurity that compelled policymakers to shorten training timelines to meet demand for security forces undermined their capabilities and made it that much more difficult to impose a monopoly on violence in the country.[373] A training deficiency hamstrung the force as it tried to combat the insurgency, and insufficient training also increased the force's propensity to actually contribute to insecurity. For example, the Afghan National Police, widely known to be undertrained and deemed "predatory" in a 2015 State report, were allegedly "largely unaware of their responsibilities and defendants' rights under the law," and routinely

engaged in torture and abuse.[374] This in turn alienated local Afghans and undermined the U.S. government's overarching security goals for the country.[375] In many ways, Afghan forces wound up increasing the insecurity that had originally motivated policymakers to rush their training. In 2017, SIGAR concluded that the United States "designed a force that was not able to provide nationwide security, especially as that force faced a larger threat than anticipated after the drawdown of coalition military forces."[376]

Around the start of transition of security responsibilities from international forces to Afghan forces in 2011, the United States once again began to see informal militia forces as a potential expedient bridge solution to the country's security problems, just as they had during the early days of the conflict.[377] The militias that the United States developed—known as the Afghan Local Police (ALP)—exhibited some of the same problems as their uniformed counterparts, such as rapid growth, weak recruits, poor training, and alleged human rights abuses.[378] In some cases, militias that operated independently of the government were absorbed into the ALP; in others, Taliban fighters who agreed to stop fighting the government were allowed to keep their weapons and join the ALP.[379] Such unconventional recruitment methods may explain why the ALP has been identified as a source of insecurity.[380]

By 2020, Afghan security forces were still replacing a quarter of the force annually, which the U.S. military has come to view as normal.

INSECURITY BEGETS INSECURITY: FAILURES OF REINTEGRATION

Perhaps the primary rationale for accepting reintegrated ex-combatants into the ALP was the high threat of retaliation from either their former fellow insurgents or their former victims.[381] In fact, both DOD and State recognized that the vulnerability of former combatants to retaliatory violence was a potential fundamental flaw in reintegration programs.[382] In a similar vein, SIGAR concluded in 2019 that few combatants would join reintegration programs without some sort of reliable assurance of physical security.[383]

In fact, insecurity was so problematic for reintegration programs that even senior program staff working under tight security faced credible threats of assassination. Most notably, Burhanuddin Rabbani, a former president of Afghanistan, was assassinated by a suicide bomber while spearheading a reconciliation and reintegration effort in 2011. By 2016, dozens of staff and over 200 reintegrated fighters participating in the same program had been killed.[384] The challenge of insecurity led some former combatants to return to the battlefield.[385]

For the ex-combatants who did join reintegration programs, insecurity complicated the delivery of benefits and services promised to them, which likely deterred other prospective participants and undermined the security dividend the program was designed to create.[386] Insecurity and the absence of a political settlement that reduced violence both deterred combatants from reintegrating and reduced the benefit of

The district governor hands supplies to a recently reintegrated Taliban commander in Khas Uruzgan District, Uruzgan Province, as part of the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Program. (NATO photo by Petty Officer 1st Class Matthew Leistikow)

reintegrating for those who did participate.[387] Taking these constraints together, SIGAR recommended in 2019 that "DOD, State, and USAID should not implement a reintegration program amid the ongoing insurgency."[388]

QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- How can U.S. agencies improve the process of prioritizing geographic areas to ensure that they are safe enough to allow programming?
- What exit criteria do U.S. agencies need to develop to determine when an area has become too dangerous for programs to continue? When those criteria are reached, what funding mechanisms need to be in place so that the program can evolve with conflict dynamics, rather than be derailed by them?
- How can host nation officials be given more voice in determining which areas are too dangerous for programs to be administered?

Relevant SIGAR Recommendations from Previous Lessons Learned Reports

DOD and USAID should update counterinsurgency and stabilization doctrine and best practices to stagger stabilization's various phases, with the provision of reliable and continuous physical security serving as the critical foundation.[389]

U.S. agencies responsible for counternarcotics efforts in major drug-transit or drug-producing countries should focus their eradication efforts in areas that are more secure, have persistent state presence, and offer more diverse livelihood opportunities.[390]

LESSON 6

The U.S. government did not understand the Afghan context and therefore failed to tailor its efforts accordingly.

CHAPTER 7

CONTEXT

U.S. soldiers with the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment man an observation post overlooking Highway 1 in Wardak province on August 12, 2013. (U.S. Army photo by 1st Lt. Yau-liong Tsai)

Ignorance of prevailing social, cultural, and political contexts in Afghanistan has been a significant contributing factor to failures at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. As detailed in Chapter 6, policymakers' and implementers' poor understanding of the Afghan context was partially a byproduct of poor security, which restricted access to critical information for planners and practitioners alike.[391] As a consequence of incomplete information, planners made sometimes bold assumptions about the country, many of which turned out to be incorrect, leaving practitioners to execute plans that were, in effect, designed for a different country context.

For example, many U.S. policymakers concluded that an emphasis on counterinsurgency in Iraq led to significant improvement there, and the model might prove equally promising in Afghanistan.[392] However, the differences between Iraq and Afghanistan were stark across a range of indicators—including levels of urbanization, unemployment, education, and public health. Yet none of these significant differences deterred the United States from using the Iraq experience as a model for Afghanistan.[393] In the process, the U.S. government mistakenly assumed that the governance challenges were somewhat equivalent in both countries; in fact, they were not.[394] As a consequence, the United States made unrealistic assumptions about the prospects for economic and security-related progress.[395]

U.S. Navy Lt. Jg. Anthony Delgadillo, Khost Provincial Reconstruction Team engineer, looks at the foundation for an addition to the Sadiq Rohee boys' school with the site engineer, on June 10, 2010. (U.S. Air Force photo by Sr. Amn. Julianne M. Showalter, Khost PRT public affairs office)

Although some missteps in Afghanistan were the result of unavoidable assumptions about unknown aspects of Afghan society, in other cases decision-makers seem to have made unnecessary assumptions about the Afghan context that could have been easily verified. U.S.-built schools provide a case in point: The design of some U.S.-funded schools required a crane to install a heavy roof, but cranes could not be used in the mountainous terrain that is characteristic of many parts of the country. Local Afghan contractors were also unfamiliar with U.S. construction methods, leading to sometimes shoddy workmanship. Adapted designs featured lighter roofs that did not require cranes, but the less robust construction was unable to support heavy snow loads, rendering them unusable.[396] U.S.-built schools were also required to have entrance ramps and extra-wide doors to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, even though they were sometimes constructed in rugged terrain that was itself inaccessible to wheelchairs.[397] NGOs argued that such building standards pushed costs higher for U.S.-built schools, which reportedly cost four to five times as much as those built by European non-profits.[398] In other cases, planners selected unsuitable construction sites, such as steep slopes or riverbeds, which they could have avoided if they had consulted a topographic map or aerial imagery.[399]

These unforced errors involved basic aspects of the Afghan environment, such as terrain and climate. The U.S. government was even less adept at perceiving and adapting to the country's social and cultural environment.

LACK OF AWARENESS ALLOWED CORRUPTION TO GROW

Early on the United States seems to have misunderstood the dynamics of political power in Afghanistan, particularly the role of patronage networks, which were born

of several decades of armed conflict and had become entrenched in the country's political economy.[400] As the United States would discover, the fact that Afghanistan lacked formalized governance institutions in the western tradition did not mean that there was ample space for the outside introduction and cultivation of those institutions. Efforts to build Western-style governance institutions and populate them with the heads of preexisting patronage networks simply empowered malign actors, who did not "self-correct" as some officials may have hoped they would. Consequently, a number of key local allies of the United States—some of whom had themselves been deposed by the Taliban to widespread applause—often actively countered U.S. efforts to foster good governance and economic growth.[401]

Political economy is the underlying political context within which reform processes are conducted. Political economy informs how power is used to manage resources and how political will enables or undermines reform.

As SIGAR highlighted in a report on corruption in Afghanistan,

> By legitimizing warlords with political and financial support, the United States helped empower a class of strongmen at the local and national levels who had conflicted allegiances between their own power networks and the Afghan state. Indirectly, the United States helped to lay a foundation for continued impunity of malign actors, weak rule of law, and the growth of corruption. Although U.S. agencies recognized the dangers of aligning with warlords, they did not fully appreciate the risks this posed to the mission in Afghanistan.[402]

Indeed, the corruption that the U.S. and coalition allies encountered in Afghanistan seems to have been viewed the same way as it would be in the United States—as the deviant criminal behavior of individual Afghan officials, rather than a systemic phenomenon.[403]

The U.S. government's misreading of the Afghan social and political environment meant that initiatives designed to stabilize and rehabilitate the country were poorly adapted to the local context. Programs to improve the economy were particularly vulnerable to the machinations and predation of Afghan powerbrokers.[404] SIGAR's report on private sector development in Afghanistan, for example, found that "the technical and financial assistance provided to Afghan institutions and firms relied mainly on Western technocratic models that often failed to adequately consider how powerful Afghan social groups and institutions influenced public policy and the functioning of markets." The rush to privatize assets and industries without mitigating the undue influence of established patronage networks made elite capture of assets almost inevitable.[405] The U.S. government's failure to understand and mitigate that capture meant that privatization of state owned enterprises not only failed to reap the intended economic benefits, but also fostered corruption and limited business-friendly government reforms.[406]

Just as the U.S. government struggled to recognize the activities of rapacious Afghan elites, so too did U.S. officials fail to understand how and why lower echelons of Afghan society resisted certain economic reforms. Many rank and file civil servants, for example, had grown accustomed to controlling the formal economy and did not welcome the advent of a Western-style market economy that relegated the state to merely supporting economic affairs. Many of these Afghan officials effectively obstructed or derailed initiatives meant to improve the country's business climate.[407]

Making the country more hospitable to the private sector also meant establishing a new legal framework and institutions for governing business activity. However, the laws that emerged from the post-Taliban state building effort were drafted by foreign advisors with only limited involvement of their Afghan counterparts. The wide-ranging legal concepts reflected in those laws sometimes conflicted with local Afghan traditions, inviting criticism that such Western imports were insensitive to local norms, specifically the tenets of Sharia law.[408] Such criticism emanated not just from reclusive clerics in Afghanistan's hinterlands, but also from parliamentarians serving in Kabul, some of whom sought to supplement or replace the Western-sponsored banking system with an Islamic version.[409] Meanwhile, Western advisors' insufficient grasp of Sharia prevented them from effectively responding to Sharia-related objections to the international community's economic programs.[410]

Sharia refers to Islamic legal codes based on the Koran, Hadith, and Sunna.

IMPOSING FORMAL INSTITUTIONS ON AN INFORMAL ENVIRONMENT

Likewise, the United States misjudged what would constitute an acceptable justice system from the perspective of many Afghans, which ultimately created an opportunity for the Taliban to exert influence at the local level. Between 2003 and 2015, the U.S. government spent more than $1 billion on rule of law programming in Afghanistan, with approximately 90 percent of that funding going toward the development of a formal legal system.[411] That system, however, was foreign to most Afghans, who favored informal, community-level traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, where an estimated 80 to 90 percent of civil disputes have always been handled.[412] Such informal justice systems operate by rules familiar to most Afghans, and the system is far more efficient.[413] In the formal court system, cases can languish for months—despite hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars spent on legal reform efforts.[414] Sibghatullah, who oversaw U.S. efforts to staff local governments during the U.S. surge, explained to SIGAR the reluctance of Afghans to use the formal court system:

> For the first year after Marjah [Helmand] was cleared [in 2010], formal judiciary officials only heard five cases because no one was used to it. Locals would tell us, "We've never seen this and need to see if it works." They also didn't think it was practical because of the slow appeals process. Some believed locals were not using it because of Taliban intimidation, but they were still going to the district governor for dispute resolution, so they couldn't have been afraid. And when the district governor would refer them to formal judiciary officials and the huqooq [mediator], whose job it was to address those grievances, locals never followed up with them.[415]

While the U.S. and the Afghan governments focused on extending governance through the provision of services—including the formal justice system—the Taliban competed for popular support by providing a semblance of security and justice via their own version of traditional dispute resolution. While the outcomes of the Taliban-run processes may not have always delivered what the United States would consider to be just and equitable outcomes, the path to those outcomes was much quicker and more familiar to many Afghans than the U.S.-sponsored system.[416] As Farid Mamundzai, the

Afghans stand outside a CERP-funded appellate courthouse in Mehtarlam, Laghman Province on June 4, 2013. (DOD Photo by Spec. Hilda Clayton)

former deputy minister of the Independent Directorate for Local Governance, told SIGAR, the "rules of justice the Taliban follow are already understood in society, which makes [them] easier for the population to accept." That broader acceptance among Afghans seems to have generated at least a modicum of legitimacy for the group among some Afghans.[417]

International legal experts were highlighting the U.S.-led coalition's inattention to informal justice in Afghanistan as early as 2007.[418] By 2009, State acknowledged the importance of traditional dispute resolution, and even claimed it was a "pillar" of the coalition's effort, despite the fact that informal justice programming was receiving only a fraction of the funding devoted to the formal system.[419] One explanation for that disparity is that senior U.S. policymakers were unable to accept the implications of supporting traditional dispute resolution, even while some corners of the bureaucracy recognized its potential. One former senior USAID official told SIGAR that "we dismissed the traditional justice system because we thought it didn't have any relevance for what we wanted to see in today's Afghanistan."[420]

Similarly, positioning traditional dispute resolution to compete with the Taliban would have put the United States dangerously close to endorsing principles that were politically untenable. As former senior State advisor Barnett Rubin told SIGAR, "Trying to compete with the Taliban's successful dispute resolution would have meant allowing sharia, and that's not something we could do politically."[421] In other words, much like our economic agenda, which floundered in a political economy dominated by patronage networks, U.S. officials chose to pursue a vision for Afghanistan's justice system that reflected American values and preferences, without sufficient regard for what was practical or possible.

POOR UNDERSTANDING OF LOCAL CONTEXT EXACERBATED CONFLICT

Policymakers' ignorance of the Afghan context at the highest strategic levels were mirrored by officials and implementers at the program level and below. Jabar Naimee, who served as governor of Kunduz, Wardak, Khost, and Laghman Provinces, told SIGAR that "in the majority of districts, we never even heard the real problems of the people. We made assumptions, conducted military operations, brought in government staff, and assumed it would lead to security and stability."[422] As practitioners followed the counterinsurgency script with insufficient attention to local context, they implemented projects that sometimes unwittingly supported one powerbroker or interest group at the expense of another, thereby stoking local conflicts and creating an opportunity for insurgents to form an alliance with the disaffected party.[423]

"Trying to compete with the Taliban's successful dispute resolution would have meant allowing sharia, and that's not something we could do politically."

—Barnett Rubin, former State advisor

Blunders like these were partially a result of insufficient information, which was difficult to obtain in an active conflict environment like Afghanistan.[424] On the other hand, it is unclear that policymakers and practitioners could have developed a sufficiently detailed and accurate understanding of the complex social environment in Afghanistan even under the best of circumstances. As a member of General Stanley McChrystal's assessment team observed, implementing an effective counterinsurgency campaign requires "a level of local knowledge that I don't have about my own hometown."[425] American advisors, practitioners, and coalition partners confronted by the opaque social and political environment became reliant on local partners for information and insights, which made them vulnerable to their manipulation and exploitation. One U.S. official, for example, told SIGAR that his team was "played all the time by the Afghans."[426]

Implementing an effective counterinsurgency campaign requires "a level of local knowledge that I don't have about my own hometown."

—Advisor to General Stanley McChrystal

The form of those manipulations varied, but one of the most damaging saw local Afghan "allies" exploit U.S. agencies for financial gain and share a portion of the proceeds with insurgents, who were paid to refrain from attacking convoys and project sites. For example, private security contractors who were paid to protect DOD and USAID assets diverted a substantial percentage of their contract awards to insurgents to buy their cooperation—making the insurgents in effect unofficial subcontractors to the U.S. government.[427] Likewise, as SIGAR found in a 2016 report, widespread corruption

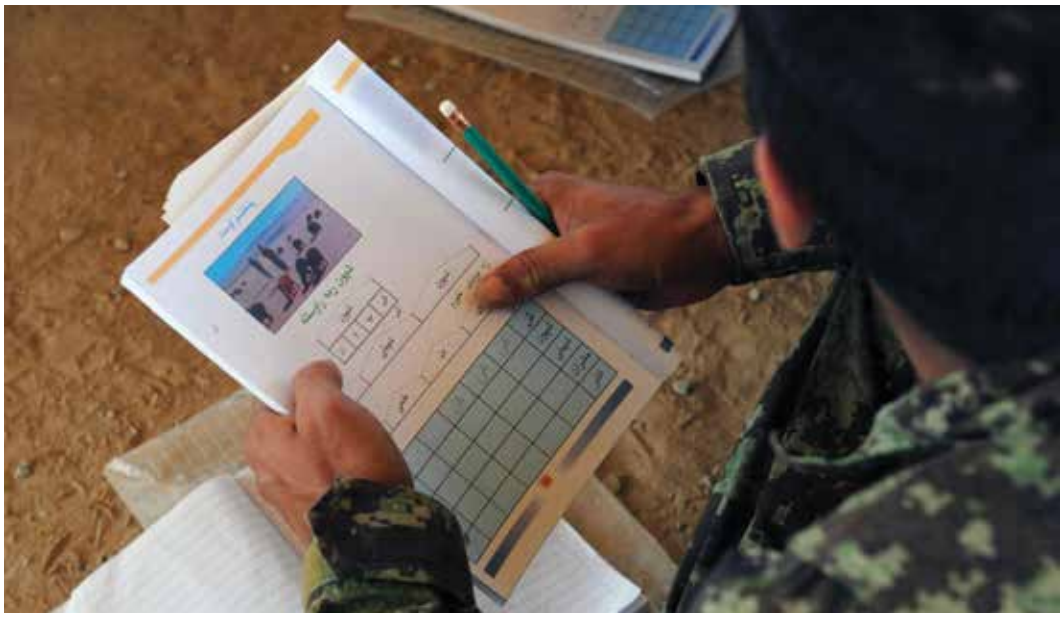
Soldiers from 2nd Platoon, Alpha Company, 1-503rd Infantry Battalion, 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team and soldiers from the Afghanistan National Army 6th Kandak provide security at the scene of an oil tanker attacked by insurgents near Sheikhabad, Sayed Abad District, Wardak Province, on January 3, 2010. (U.S. Army photo by 2nd Lt. Jeff Hall)

in the Afghan government meant U.S. money flowed to the insurgency through a web of corruption that encompassed Afghan "officials, drug traffickers, transnational criminals, and insurgent and terrorist groups."[428] As these examples reveal, U.S. misunderstanding of the incentives and behavior of "local allies" had a direct, countervailing effect on our efforts to secure and stabilize the country.

U.S. OFFICIALS HAD A LIMITED UNDERSTANDING OF THE VERY INSTITUTIONS THEY BUILT

The U.S. government's ignorance of Afghanistan's social landscapes was not limited to complex village politics or sordid ties between insurgents and nominal U.S. allies. In fact, the United States appears to have been equally incapable of grappling with and adapting to the social dynamics within the very institutions it fostered in Kabul. This applies even to the most critical institutions for maintaining stability, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, in which the United States has invested over $83 billion.[429] For example, by providing material support and equipment to certain units within the ANDSF without consideration for ethnic dynamics between units, the United States could be perceived as biased in favor of one ethnic group or faction at the expense of another. A 2017 SIGAR report on the development of the ANDSF underscored that point, finding that the United States "largely ignored" intra-force political dynamics, which led to "major social and political imbalances" within the ANDSF.[430]

U.S. policymakers also overlooked the human capital constraints of the Afghan population. Advanced weapons systems, vehicles, and logistics used by Western militaries were beyond the capabilities of the largely illiterate and uneducated Afghan force, which led Western advisors to intervene and perform the tasks at hand



An Afghan National Army recruit receiving literacy training during Basic Warrior Training at the Regional Military Training Center in Kandahar. (Photo by Adrienne Brammer)

themselves, rather than see them done poorly or not at all.[431] The result was to create long-term dependencies and delay the U.S. disengagement.[432]

Solving the Afghan security forces' human capital problem was not simply a matter of redoubling the military training effort. The Afghan population's low levels of education and literacy meant that trainees actually required a customized training regimen tailored to their low baseline, rather than a replication of training that was offered in other contexts—for example, PowerPoint-based curricula used in the Balkans.[433] Furthermore, the limited number of educated, literate, and professional members of the ANDSF who did not require remedial training were likely to be syphoned off by specialized units, the civil service, or the private sector, which afforded higher pay and a less dangerous occupation.[434]

In Afghanistan, the United States seems to have labored to develop an ANDSF that could not be derived from the extant Afghan population without significant cultural shifts, including the erosion of factionalism, the development of a stronger education system—and, as it turns out, altered gender norms.

THE UNITED STATES STRUGGLED TO ACCOUNT FOR GENDER DYNAMICS

U.S. efforts to promote gender equality have occurred against the backdrop of the country's decades-old struggle between traditionalists and modernists over the role of women in Afghan society. Afghanistan's troubled history of efforts to reform gender roles date back to the late 19th century, and often faced violent resistance, especially in rural communities.[435] Yet as they sought to advance the status and rights of Afghan

women and girls, U.S. agencies often failed to adequately appreciate the Afghan cultural context and acute sensitivities around gender norms, or to set realistic goals that reflected the barriers to progress.

For example, it was not until 2014 that USAID placed staff with expertise on gender issues in each of the agency's technical offices in Kabul. For many years, without enough gender advisors to cover the breadth of development programs being designed and implemented, gender analyses were often delayed or ineffective—despite being required by agency guidelines.[436] Multiple officials and gender specialists told SIGAR that failure to anticipate the Afghan cultural context undercut U.S. efforts to support women and girls.[437] Further, many U.S. strategy documents did not properly address the formidable cultural and social barriers to advancing women's rights.[438]

U.S.-supported recruitment targets for women in the ANDSF were highly unrealistic, despite significant financial support dedicated to increasing female participation.[439] U.S. officials lowered the recruitment targets over time as they grappled with countervailing forces, including familial pressure, childcare responsibilities, cultural restrictions on women's mobility, and—especially within the police force—the threat of sexual harassment and abuse.[440]

WILLFUL DISREGARD FOR CRITICAL INFORMATION

When the United States and its allies invaded Afghanistan in late 2001, they embarked on an ambitious effort to encourage or even impose broad reforms that touched essentially all aspects of Afghan society, including politics, economics, education, defense, rule of law, and the societal roles and relations between men and women.

Women spin thread at an Agriculture Fair in Mazar-e Sharif, Balkh Province in 2009. (USAID photo)

The U.S. government pursued these reforms while simultaneously attempting to quell multiple security threats, including a burgeoning Taliban insurgency, a powerful narcotics industry, warlords entrenched in the Afghan government, and a nascent local affiliate of the Islamic State. Yet as this chapter demonstrates, rarely did U.S. officials have even a mediocre understanding of the environment, much less how it was responding to U.S. interventions.

In fact, blaming mistakes on a simple lack of information may be charitable. Many mistakes were borne from a willful disregard for information that may have been available. After all, in many cases, the U.S. government's very purpose was to usher in an orderly revolution that would replace existing Afghan social systems with western or "modern" systems. If the intention was to build institutions from scratch, understanding and working within the country's traditional systems was unnecessary. As one former senior USAID official told SIGAR, "We wanted to give them something they had never had before."[441]

But instead of being a society deconstructed to its foundation by conflict and primed for the introduction of western political, economic, and judicial systems, it turned out Afghanistan was a complex society with ingrained traditions and an incorrigible political economy. These traditions were neither easy to uproot and replace, nor could they be shoehorned into a Western institutional framework, as evidenced by the attempts to use strongmen and warlords to build a nascent bureaucracy.

QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- What kind of expertise does reconstruction require? How can U.S. agencies develop sufficient knowledge about best practices in reconstruction between missions? Would doing so require new offices and institutions, or new capacities in existing offices and institutions? For any mission that grows, how can this capacity be thoughtfully adapted and scaled?
- What changes need to be made to U.S. government programs in conflict-affected countries to ensure granular research is conducted in targeted communities or institutions before programming begins? How can the program design phase include more extensive consultation with diverse representatives of local communities and would-be beneficiaries?
- How can the Congress motivate agencies to prepare for reconstruction missions? What oversight model would best encourage agencies to develop local understanding of populations and institutions as a precondition for effective programming?

Relevant SIGAR Recommendations from Previous Lessons Learned Reports

DOD and USAID should prioritize developing and retaining human terrain analytical expertise that would allow a more nuanced understanding of local communities.[442]

At the onset of any contingency operation, the intelligence community should analyze links between host government officials, corruption, criminality, trafficking, and terrorism. This baseline assessment should be updated regularly.[443]

DOD, State, USAID, and the intelligence community should each designate a senior anticorruption official to assist with strategic, operational, and tactical planning at headquarters at the onset of and throughout a contingency operation.[444]

To prevent the empowerment of one political faction or ethnic group, DOD, in coordination with State and the intelligence community, should monitor and evaluate all formal and informal security forces operating within a host nation. DOD should also identify and monitor both formal and informal chains of command and map social networks of the host nation's security forces. DOD's intelligence agencies should track and analyze political associations, biographical data, and patronage networks of senior security force and political leadership.[445]

The Congress should consider requiring certification from State that viable alternative livelihoods are in place and potential negative outcomes have been considered prior to the obligation of funding for drug-crop eradication.[446]

LESSON 7

U.S. government agencies rarely conducted sufficient monitoring and evaluation to understand the impact of their efforts.

CHAPTER 8

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

A USAID-funded program evaluator interviews an elder in Aybak District, Samangan Province, in May 2014. (USAID photo)

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is the process of determining what works, what does not, and what needs to change as a result.[447] Conceptually, M&E is relatively straightforward, but in practice, it is extremely challenging.[448] This is especially true in complex and unpredictable environments like Afghanistan, where staff turnover is rapid, multiple agencies must coordinate programs simultaneously, security and access restrictions make it hard to understand a program's challenges and impact, and a myriad of variables compete to influence outcomes.[449] The absence of periodic reality checks created the risk of doing the wrong thing perfectly: A project that completed required tasks would be considered "successful," whether or not it had achieved or contributed to broader, more important goals.[450]

SIGAR's extensive audit work on sectors spanning health, education, rule of law, women's rights, infrastructure, security assistance, and others collectively paints a picture of U.S. agencies struggling to effectively measure results while sometimes relying on shaky data to make claims of success.[451] In Afghanistan, the U.S. government's M&E efforts have been underemphasized and understaffed because the overall campaign focused on doing as much as possible as quickly as possible, rather than ensuring programs were designed well to begin with and could adapt as needed.[452] As a result, the U.S. government missed many opportunities to identify critical flaws in its interventions or to act on those that were identified.[453] These shortcomings

endangered the lives of U.S., Afghan, and coalition government personnel and civilians, and undermined progress toward strategic goals.[454]

While conducting effective M&E in Afghanistan is more challenging than in many countries, U.S. agencies face similar hurdles in conducting M&E in other countries, including such volatile places as Pakistan, Syria, and Yemen. Thus, many of the lessons learned in Afghanistan apply to the U.S. government's work elsewhere.[455] In 2018, USAID reported that the vast majority of countries in which it had worked over the previous 20 years had experienced some degree of violence that affected its programs.[456] Other impediments to thoughtful M&E are internal. Former USAID Administrator Andrew Natsios has observed that "good development practice requires experimentation, risk taking, and innovation," but there is little room for any of those attributes in the modern bureaucracy of many donors, including USAID and the World Bank. In his view, USAID is particularly risk averse because of its lack of political support in Washington.[457]

The three agencies through which the U.S. spent the most money on reconstruction in Afghanistan were DOD, USAID, and State.[458] While DOD has significantly more resources (see Chapter 2), none of the three make M&E a sufficient agency-wide priority. Doing so would require nothing short of a transformation in institutional culture and staffing practices at all three agencies.[459] For example, personnel incentives could be altered to reward staff who use M&E to improve program performance, instead of rewarding staff who manage the most expensive programs, as they often do today. Agencies also need to develop cultures in which admitting failure is not only acceptable, but encouraged.[460] Without an honest assessment of what has worked and what has not, course correction is impossible and decisions on resourcing cannot be guided by program effectiveness. Only the Congress and agency leadership can create such a transformation by encouraging staff to focus on program quality and by declining opportunities to punish them when their analyses reveal problems.

Adequate M&E systems exist on paper but are not followed.[461] In general, State and USAID have much less flexible spending authorities and leaner staffing and funding than DOD, which constrains their abilities to adjust programming to new information and realities.[462] Of these, USAID has the most rigorous M&E systems. Congressional scrutiny of USAID's budget has demanded greater investment in M&E, while the opposite is true of DOD.[463] Even though the scale of DOD's reconstruction spending in Afghanistan was significantly greater than those of USAID and State combined, for most of the reconstruction effort DOD lacked a uniformly applied M&E policy.[464]

INSUFFICIENT STAFFING

M&E at all three agencies also suffered because of insufficient personnel, but to varying degrees. As SIGAR's lessons learned report on M&E found, "an enduring feature of contingency environments like Afghanistan is that when spending increases, oversight generally does not keep pace."[465] Because agencies lacked the organic capacity to perform all of the many functions they were asked to take on, they hired

an unprecedentedly large contractor force.[466] The M&E report further noted that "virtually every report written on reconstruction has pointed out that contract oversight personnel are overworked, overburdened, or too few in number."[467]

U.S. government personnel and expatriate implementing partner staff lacked access to project sites to do their own assessments of programming.[468] Instead, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, they attempt to triangulate information from different sources, such as local government officials and community representatives.[469] All three agencies also tried to mitigate their M&E deficits by outsourcing it to third party contractors.[470] Given how limited M&E resources and capacity were, many aspects of M&E were outsourced to the same company or organization implementing the program in the first place, effectively assigning them to oversee themselves.[471] Staffing issues were particularly acute at USAID, which had seen its global staff slashed from 12,000 during the Vietnam era to 2,000 by 2008.[472] At one point, the agency determined that, in order to meet the U.S. government's average ratio of dollars to contracting officers, it would have to send nearly its entire overseas workforce to work only in Afghanistan.[473] State had similar problems.[474] Even DOD, which had by far the largest workforce, suffered from a shortage of qualified civil affairs personnel to assess the effectiveness and sustainability of CERP programming.[475]

PERENNIAL STRUGGLES: MONITORING WHAT HAPPENED, EVALUATING WHETHER IT WORKED, AND LEARNING TO IMPROVE

In theory, monitoring and evaluation has three main components. The first, referred to as monitoring by USAID and State and sometimes as measuring performance by DOD, is the most straightforward and also receives the most emphasis. It involves determining whether a program is doing what it was designed to do, including undertaking specific activities in the number and at the speed planned.[476] The second, referred to as evaluation by USAID and State and sometimes as measuring effectiveness by DOD, entails determining whether a program or portfolio of programs is achieving its goals in order to inform current or future programming.[477] If not, evaluation seeks to determine whether that is because of poor program design, poor implementation, or both.[478] Evaluations should include the identification of flawed assumptions—either explicit or implicit—and unintended consequences.[479] However, they often fail to do so, and, when they do, agencies sometimes fail to adjust programming in response.[480]

USAID determined that, in order to meet the U.S. government's average ratio of dollars to contracting officers, it would have to send nearly its entire overseas workforce to work only in Afghanistan.

Regardless of the source of the failure, the third component, learning, involves course corrections to ongoing or planned programs or strategies based on evaluation findings.[481] Learning is the feedback loop from the programmatic level up to the group or portfolio of programs, and may require readjustment to higher-level strategies.[482] Agencies found monitoring easier than evaluation or learning, so they tended to place more emphasis

A USAID-funded program evaluator in Paghman District, Kabul Province, is taught how to take GPS coordinates during site inspections. (USAID photo)

on it.[483] For example, it was easier to count the number of schools built than it was to determine whether there were children learning in them or whether their construction convinced Afghans to support their government.[484] "That was always the last 10 yards that we couldn't run," remembered a former senior U.S. military official. "We never broke the code on impact."[485]

EVEN MONITORING WAS SPOTTY

Although easier than determining a program's actual effectiveness, monitoring its implementation was still difficult. Agencies were sometimes unable to establish with confidence even the most basic information, and they often reported unverified project information. SIGAR has found that the extant data on the Army's Commander's Emergency Response Program is spotty, with significant gaps, omissions, and duplicates.[486] Sometimes problems like these were not just oversights. One former senior USAID official recounted how a clandestine business in Kandahar would, for a fee, provide contractors with generic photographs of projects customized with fraudulent geotags embedded in the digital photos, to help contractors defraud USAID.[487]

The highest standard of rigorous evaluation is establishing that an intervention caused, or at least contributed to, a desired outcome.[488] This precision is extremely difficult in an environment as complex as Afghanistan, where the fog of war often means the U.S. government has a limited understanding of the environment, the problem, the intended solution, and how all three are interacting.[489] Further, it is easy for cause and effect to blur when donors have many programs running simultaneously and a plethora of Afghan stakeholders all have their own goals which are often at odds with those of donors.[490] Most of these moving parts are beyond the control of any program, agency,

or donor—for example, whether a local powerbroker will interfere in a project, or whether the Afghan government will fulfill its commitment to purge corrupt officials.

M&E for reconstruction programs was especially difficult because the goals, such as "promote effective governance that is acceptable to the Afghan people," were often intangible.[491] The complex causal chains through which donors sought to achieve change made assigning impact to any one program extraordinarily difficult.[492] SIGAR has repeatedly identified data quality problems with metrics, such as those touted by USAID as showing improvements in life expectancy, maternal mortality, and school enrollment.[493] However, even if these statistics were reliable, they are not enough to determine whether USAID's health programming improved perceptions of the Afghan government. This is particularly true because, in reality, many programs were implemented by NGOs rather than the Afghan government.[494] It was also unclear how to accurately measure popular perceptions of legitimacy. U.S. officials often tried to do so through public opinion polling, the shortcomings of which are covered in multiple SIGAR reports.[495]

As a result of challenges in measuring less tangible outcomes, M&E efforts tended to select indicators that were sometimes less relevant but more measurable, sometimes referred to as "proxy indicators."[496] There was a pervasive overemphasis on quantitative indicators at the expense of critical qualitative context during both monitoring and evaluation. Precision is often a façade, quantifiability frequently obscures important nuance or qualification, and measurability is not always a good proxy for efficacy.[497] There have also been criticisms that the focus was on what agencies were *doing* with their budgets rather than what they were *achieving*.[498]

EVALUATION WAS STYMIED BY STRATEGIC CONFUSION, WHEN IT WAS TRIED AT ALL

M&E is supposed to be based on clear theories, articulated during program design, indicating how a specific intervention or series of interventions will achieve the desired change.[499] During implementation, programs should continually assess whether those theories, and the assumptions underlying them, are proving correct.[500] However, poorly informed program design often left the theory of change unclear, internally contradictory, or fundamentally flawed.[501] As detailed in Chapter 2, confusion at the program level stemmed from a lack of clarity at the strategic level.[502] That lack of clarity in the proposed causal chain presented obvious problems for testing its efficacy.[503] In addition, agencies frequently simply failed to test the assumptions in the causal chain underlying program design.[504]

Sometimes agencies did not attempt evaluation at all, despite requirements that they do so.[505] For example, SIGAR's 2017 audit of six projects funded by the Afghanistan Infrastructure Fund found that all three agencies implementing the program failed to establish metrics or measure progress towards their planned counterinsurgency effects.[506] DOD failed to establish metrics more often than State or USAID, including

on more than $1.62 billion contracts to Dyncorp.[507] Ultimately, impact was often just assumed by all three agencies, supported by tautological arguments, anecdotes, and thin connections between program activities and purported outcomes.[508] SIGAR's lessons learned report on gender found that programs often claimed to have achieved their goals, such as improving Afghan women's access to justice or job opportunities, without providing evidence—instead, relying on quotes from beneficiaries or the number of women trained in a skill.[509]

LEARNING WAS RARE

Learning was often limited because good evaluations were ignored and poor ones could not articulate or justify the required changes.[510] A 2018 review of State's foreign assistance evaluation efforts found that the agency used evaluations in a "sporadic" manner.[511] When poor, evaluation quality impeded learning by failing to identify the core problems or to suggest credible solutions.[512] An unfavorable evaluation of a program could have negative implications for its implementing partner and U.S. government staff overseeing it, or could result in the program's budget being cut. As a result, there was a tendency for their language to be watered down. Sometimes, evaluations intentionally obfuscated the truth.[513] In addition, poor M&E sometimes left the United States unable to determine which programs or combination of programs were most effective, making it impossible to redirect more funding towards them.[514]

M&E is not useful if the findings it produces cannot be fed back into existing programs in real time and used to inform the design of new ones.[515] While the strategies and circumstances programs seek to influence can change quickly, rigid regulations on how funds can be spent prevent significant deviation from a program's original purpose.

A USAID-funded program evaluator interviews an elder in Helmand Province in late 2013. (USAID photo)

Changing a contract is generally very time consuming and impeded by onerous bureaucratic, legal, and technical obstacles.[516] As many analysts have observed, reducing these impediments is one critical way that M&E could be improved.[517] SIGAR's M&E report found that it currently takes State about a year to revise or terminate a contract.[518] As a result, the agency often moves on to new awards instead of trying to improve ongoing ones.[519] SIGAR found similar problems at USAID.[520]

In addition, evaluations are often finalized too late to inform the programs they cover, but too early to discern the program's impact, which takes time to appear.[521] Had these evaluations been used to inform the next round of programs, they still would have been useful, but this was rare. A RAND Corporation review of 89 think tank, academic, and donor-funded studies of stabilization and development programming in Afghanistan found that few of the recommendations from those studies had been implemented.[522]

INCORRECT THEORIES OF CHANGE, RESISTANCE TO HONESTY, AND OBFUSCATION

Just as the different components of M&E varied in their level of difficulty, so too did the challenges vary when conducting M&E at different scales. Program-level M&E was the easiest, followed by M&E of groups of programs. Because lower levels of analysis were easier, too much emphasis tended to be focused on them.[523] In contrast, some of the most useful but also challenging aspects of M&E include the development and constant reassessment of robust, evidence-based models to connect programs to higher-order strategic objectives. However, this was rarely done in a meaningful way.[524] As one senior U.S. official in Washington told SIGAR, "It was impossible to create good metrics. We tried using troop numbers trained, violence levels, and control of territory, and none of it painted an accurate picture. At the end of the day, there was nothing for us to latch on to except for number of attacks against civilians, ANDSF, and [coalition partners]."[525]

In fact, program-level M&E report writers were discouraged from identifying strategic errors that undermined the success of the program but could not be addressed at that low level.[526] This was particularly true if they were politically inconvenient, in which case they were sometimes censored.[527] This resulted in a system that prevented those who were closest to the program, and best placed to recognize the disconnect between strategy and programs, from raising those issues.

That, in turn, often broke the critical feedback loop meant to funnel information from programs all over the country to central planning processes in Kabul and Washington.[528] Theoretically, the strategy for the whole reconstruction campaign should shape the theory of change for each portfolio of programs, which informed each program's design.[529] But theories of change, and the evidence underpinning them, were even more problematic at the portfolio level than the program level.[530] USAID portfolio reviews and mid-course stock-taking exercises were mandated to revalidate assumptions and identify changes in context, but these suffered from the same intentional obfuscation as program-level evaluations.[531]

Before and after photographs of a flood protection wall built by USAID in Ahmadabad District, Paktiya Province. (USAID photo)

In a process similar to USAID's portfolio review, DOD commanders and their staff sometimes conduct contract management reviews to reassess the relevance of priority contracts to the command's mission. The Army has identified these as a best practice, but they are neither defined in doctrine nor required in practice.[532] However, there were some examples of useful portfolio-level evaluation efforts. Germany conducted a successful long-term impact review of its development activities over a period of six years, in combination with a portfolio review of its reconstruction funding. The German government said that these two exercises, while limited, provided a few key points of reference for strategic decision-making.[533] SIGAR's lessons learned report on stabilization covered a similarly pioneering effort by USAID to assess USAID and DOD's shared portfolio of stabilization programs, but it was concluded too late to provide useful input into most of the programs it studied.[534]

"It was impossible to create good metrics. We tried using troop numbers trained, violence levels, and control of territory, and none of it painted an accurate picture. At the end of the day, there was nothing for us to latch on to except for number of attacks against civilians, ANDSF, and [coalition partners]."

—Senior U.S. official

Critical assumptions often went unchallenged and uncorrected. Thus, programs were often blamed for poor performance when they had actually been set up to fail from the outset. For example, for too long the U.S. government held onto the assumption that it was creating a transparent, rule-bound Afghan government from scratch in a way that would benefit the public. The United States failed to grasp the degree to which American largesse was captured by Afghan elites—even in the face of strong evidence that this was happening.[535] Instead, as SIGAR's lessons learned reports on reintegration and counternarcotics found, U.S. programs empowered malign actors and exacerbated

preexisting inequities, undermining the legitimacy of the Afghan government they were intended to bolster.[536] A senior evaluation advisor told SIGAR that USAID is reluctant to do political analysis, because doing so risks inconvenient conclusions. For example, he said, USAID requested the removal of the term "mafia" as a description of the web of corruption at high levels of the Afghan government.[537] Excising a potentially offensive term is one thing; trying to design and assess programming without acknowledging, much less grappling with, the realities that term referred to is a recipe for failure.

MONEY SPENT, NOT IMPACT ACHIEVED, BECAME THE PRIMARY METRIC OF SUCCESS

Another result of the broken feedback loop was that budgeting decisions were often not made based on program effectiveness. A USAID official told SIGAR that congressional earmarks and directives have had little to do with the quality of programming. "It can go either way: you can have a bad evaluation and end up having more money for an activity, or else you can have a good evaluation and end up with less money for the activity," the official said.[538]

Agencies faced massive pressure from the Congress to report that they were achieving success. SIGAR's lessons learned report on M&E summarized the drivers behind this pressure as having been "overoptimism, an institutional drive to produce good news stories, and the imperative to show progress in time to serve the ends of various political timetables."[539] While a 2009 independent study on M&E found that this is a problem for USAID globally, it may have been worse in Afghanistan because of the high-profile nature of the mission.[540] Pressure to produce good news undermined program performance by discouraging the kind of honest assessments necessary to fix problems.[541] In the words of one evaluation consultant, "There's always so much pressure to present a good story, including leaving things out when they go wrong."[542]

Each agency faced more pressure to do *something* than to do the right thing.[543] Eventually, some programming began to be designed and implemented with the primary goal of producing good news by achieving and reporting on quantitative outputs as quickly as possible.[544] In some cases it is clear that this dynamic greatly reduced programmatic efficacy.[545] The faulty program design of cash-for-work programs in Helmand Province, for example, created unintended consequences: Spending was so heavy that the local economy artificially tripled or quadrupled in size, and some teachers quit their jobs because day labor paid better.[546]

Perversely, because it was the easiest thing to monitor, the amount of money spent by a program often became the most important measure of success. A USAID official told SIGAR, "The Hill was always asking, 'Did you spend the money?' . . . I didn't hear many questions about what the effects were."[547] Pressure to do more, spend more, and make quick progress also came from senior agency leadership. Program budgets were dramatically expanded, despite objections from USAID officials who argued that such large sums would prove ineffective and wasteful.[548] SIGAR's lessons learned report on

corruption found that "the incentive structure did not encourage U.S. officials to report on waste, fraud, and abuse, or on weaknesses in oversight." Nor were contractors or NGOs, who benefitted from the largesse of the security and state-building effort, incentivized to report such weaknesses.[549] Likewise, a former senior military official and a former civil affairs officer both said that spending more time measuring one project's impact would have meant less time requesting and implementing new projects, which was an important criteria against which commanders and civil affairs units were judged.[550]

LESS AMBITIOUS PROGRAMMING, OR PRIORITIZE M&E

The reconstruction of Afghanistan has demonstrated that U.S. agencies' failure to strictly adhere to their own best practices regarding oversight ratios of dollars-to-personnel is an existential threat to the success of their programs. Unless and until agencies are permitted to dramatically increase their staffing levels for program oversight and M&E, the only way to ensure that sufficient time and attention is dedicated to M&E would be for agencies to significantly limit the scale and complexity of the programming they undertake.[551] More and better staffing would allow the conceptual and logistical challenges to effective M&E to be given their due attention, particularly for larger efforts. But better staffing alone would not be sufficient; M&E needs to become a much higher priority for U.S. agencies. This is only possible if congressional and internal agency policies recognize the immense challenges of programming in countries like Afghanistan, and start encouraging experimentation and learning as institutional values, rather than punishing failure in ways that ensure failures will be repeated.

"The Hill was always asking, 'Did you spend the money?' . . . I didn't hear many questions about what the effects were."

—USAID official

QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- What budgeting and organizational reforms are necessary to ensure U.S. programs in conflict-affected environments prioritize impact? How can U.S. agencies ensure that all programs are accompanied by rigorous M&E? How might their personnel evaluation criteria need to change to reward thoughtful M&E over budget size or burn rate?
- How might the Congress change the way it oversees agencies working in conflict-affected environments so that it increases both its expectations and funding for M&E? How can the Congress encourage thoughtful experimentation and normalize failure, as long as both lead to demonstrable learning in reconstruction?

Relevant SIGAR Recommendations from Previous Lessons Learned Reports

In order to maximize the effectiveness of future reconstruction programming, State, USAID, and DOD should determine the 10 most successful, and 10 least successful, reconstruction programs or projects of their respective department or agency. The determination should be based on the extent to which the programs or projects contributed to the accomplishment of U.S. strategic goals and should include a detailed explanation of how the programs and projects were evaluated and selected. Its findings should be incorporated into future planning, including planning for reconstruction-like programs or projects in other countries, if applicable.[552]

State, USAID, and DOD should more regularly conduct impact evaluations to assess the effects of contracted reconstruction and other foreign assistance programs, including security sector assistance.[553]

DOD should design new monitoring and evaluation tools capable of analyzing both tangible and intangible factors affecting force readiness.[554]

DOD and State should develop new metrics of effectiveness for foreign military training.[555]

USAID should continue to invest human, financial, and time resources in rigorous monitoring, evaluation, and analysis, including establishing a long-term framework that transcends individual projects.[556]

USAID should prioritize the collection of accurate and reliable data for its stabilization projects.[557]

U.S. agencies responsible for counternarcotics efforts should use geospatial imagery, crop mapping, and other effective monitoring and evaluation systems to more accurately capture both development and counternarcotics outcomes. This data should be shared among all U.S. agencies with counterdrug responsibilities.[558]

The Congress may wish to consider appropriating funds to DOD, State, and USAID specifically for impact evaluation of both Afghanistan reconstruction programs and more broadly for U.S. foreign assistance, including security sector assistance. An alternative would be to mandate that a certain proportion of funds appropriated to these agencies be used for impact evaluation.[559]

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION: PREPARATION NEEDED FOR RECONSTRUCTION TO SUCCEED

Afghans sit on food donations in the back of a pickup truck before distribution to needy families in Nawa District, Helmand Province, in September 2010. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Mark Fayloga

This report raises critical questions about the U.S. government's ability to carry out reconstruction efforts on the scale seen in Afghanistan. As an inspector general's office charged with overseeing reconstruction spending in Afghanistan, SIGAR's approach has generally been technical; we identify specific problems and offer specific solutions. However, after 13 years of oversight, the cumulative list of systemic challenges SIGAR and other oversight bodies have identified is staggering. As former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley told SIGAR, "We just don't have a post-conflict stabilization model that works. Every time we have one of these things, it is a pick-up game. I don't have confidence that if we did it again, we would do any better."[560]

This was equally apparent after the Vietnam War, when a war-weary and divided country had little appetite to engage in another similar conflict. After Vietnam, for example, the U.S. Army disbanded most active duty civil affairs units and reduced the number of foreign area officers, the Army's "regionally focused experts in political-military operations."[561] Special Forces moved away from counterinsurgency and instead focused on conducting small-scale operations in support of conventional forces.[562] And USAID's global staff was gradually cut by 83 percent.[563]

In other words, according to former Vice Chief of Staff of the Army General Jack Keane, "After the Vietnam War, we purged ourselves of everything that had to do with irregular warfare or insurgency, because it had to do with how we lost that war. In hindsight,

that was a bad decision."[564] After all, declining to prepare after Vietnam did not prevent the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; instead, it ensured they would become quagmires.

Rather than motivating the U.S. government to improve, the difficulty of these missions may instead encourage U.S. officials to move on and prepare for something new. According to Robert Gates, former secretary of defense from 2006–2011:

> I have noticed too much of a tendency towards what might be called 'Next-War-itis,' the propensity of much of the defense establishment to be in favor of what might be needed in a future conflict. . . . Overall, the kinds of capabilities we will most likely need in the years ahead will often resemble the kinds of capabilities we need today.[565]

The post-Afghanistan experience may be no different. As this report shows, there are multiple reasons to develop these capabilities and prepare for reconstruction missions in conflict-affected countries:

1. They are very expensive. For example, all war-related costs for U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan over the last two decades are estimated to be $6.4 trillion.[566]
2. They usually go poorly.
3. Widespread recognition that they go poorly has not prevented U.S. officials from pursuing them.
4. Rebuilding countries mired in conflict is actually a continuous U.S. government endeavor, reflected by efforts in the Balkans and Haiti and smaller efforts currently underway in Mali, Burkina Faso, Somalia, Yemen, Ukraine, and elsewhere.[567]
5. Large reconstruction campaigns usually start small, so it would not be hard for the U.S. government to slip down this slope again somewhere else and for the outcome to be similar to that of Afghanistan.[568]

Nevertheless, after the last two decades in Afghanistan and Iraq, State, USAID, and DOD have all signaled they do not see large-scale missions as likely in the future. The Stabilization Assistance Review approved by all three agencies in 2018 noted, "There is no appetite to repeat large-scale reconstruction efforts, and therefore our engagements must be more measured in scope and adaptable in execution."[569] Just as after Vietnam, today U.S. policymakers and the public they serve may have sound reasons for avoiding another prolonged conflict and reconstruction mission. However, that does not mean such an endeavor is avoidable in the future.

As SIGAR's stabilization report notes, "There will likely be times in the future when insurgent control or influence over a particular area or population is deemed an imminent threat to U.S. interests."[570] If the U.S. government does not prepare for that likelihood, it may once again try to build the necessary knowledge and capacity on the fly. As seen in Afghanistan and Iraq, doing so has proven difficult, costly, and prone to avoidable mistakes.

President Barack Obama meets with his national security team on Afghanistan and Pakistan in the Situation Room of the White House, on June 23, 2010. (Photo by Pete Souza)

As former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker observed, "You have to start working on it before you need it."[571] One former senior DOD official likewise noted that rebuilding another country requires advanced skills that must be cultivated ahead of time. "You wouldn't invent how to do infantry operations [or] artillery at the start of a war. You need [to already have] the science behind [reconstruction] and people who think about it 24/7."[572]

Building on SIGAR's body of work, as well as the work of inspector general offices across the government, this report points to conceptual, administrative, and logistical work that should be done between large-scale reconstruction efforts to increase the U.S. government's chances of success in future campaigns.

The nature and range of the investment necessary to properly prepare for these campaigns is an open question. In previous lessons learned reports (see next page), SIGAR has made recommendations for existing U.S. government offices to create a database of qualified personnel to call up when necessary, build interagency doctrine for security sector assistance, and establish anti-corruption offices within key agencies, among others.[573] As former U.S. envoy to Afghanistan James Dobbins observed, properly preparing "doesn't mean that you have to have a standing capability to immediately train [an entire army], but you need to have the know-how and an ability to surge those kinds of resources."[574] Others have argued that such an ability requires a permanent office with the authority and funding to prepare for, plan, execute, and evaluate all reconstruction missions.[575]

U.S. agencies should continue to explore how they can ensure they have the strategic planning capabilities, reconstruction doctrine, policies, best practices, standard operating procedures, institutional knowledge, and personnel structures necessary for both large and small reconstruction missions.

SIGAR Lessons Learned Reports

Corruption in Conflict
Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan (2016)

Divided Responsibility
Lessons from U.S. Security Sector Assistance Efforts in Afghanistan (2019)

Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan (2017)

Reintegration of Ex-Combatants
Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan (2019)

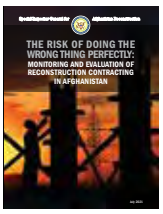
Private Sector Development and Economic Growth
Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan (2018)

Elections:
Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan (2021)

Stabilization
Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan (2018)

Support for Gender Equality
Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan (2021)

Counternarcotics
Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan (2018)



The Risk of Doing the Wrong Thing Perfectly
Monitoring and Evaluation of Reconstruction Contracting in Afghanistan (2021)

Upcoming Topics

Policing

Personnel

Conditionality

اداره سر مفتش ویژه برای بازسازی افغانستان

افغانستان د پیا رغاونې لپاره د ځانګړې ستر مفتش اداره

APPENDICES AND ENDNOTES

Spec. Michael Merlo, a paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne Division's 1st Brigade Combat Team, walks through a field of wheat while on patrol in Ghazni Province on June 15, 2012. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Michael J. MacLeod)

METHODOLOGY

SIGAR conducts its lessons learned program under the authority of Public Law 110-181 and the Inspector General Act of 1978, as amended. This report was completed in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's Quality Standards for Federal Offices of Inspector General (commonly referred to as "the Blue Book"). These standards require that we carry out our work with integrity, objectivity, and independence, and provide information that is factually accurate and reliable. SIGAR's lessons learned reports are broad in scope and based on a wide range of source material. To achieve the goal of high quality and to help ensure our reports are factually accurate and reliable, the reports are subject to extensive review by subject matter experts and relevant U.S. government agencies.

Unlike most SIGAR lessons learned reports, this 20th anniversary report draws primarily from SIGAR's body of work over the last 13 years, particularly its lessons learned research. That larger body of work relies on publicly available material, including reports by USAID, State, DOD, and coalition partner nations, as well as books, think tank reports, journal articles, press reports, and academic studies. SIGAR also relies on its access to material that is not publicly available, including thousands of documents provided by U.S. government agencies, from strategies and unclassified cables to program reports and evaluations.

While the documentary evidence tells a story, it cannot substitute for the experience, knowledge, and wisdom of people involved in Afghanistan's reconstruction. SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program has conducted more than 760 interviews with current and former U.S. and foreign government officials, implementing partners, contractors, and experts since 2014. SIGAR's lessons learned reports have made extensive use of these interviews, which provide valuable insights into the rationale behind decisions, the debates within and between U.S. and Afghan government agencies, and the frustrations that spanned the years, but often remained unwritten.

Due in part to the politically sensitive nature of reconstruction efforts, a majority of the interviewees that informed or were quoted in this report wished to remain anonymous. For those still working in government, confidentiality was particularly important. Therefore, to preserve anonymity, our interviews often cite a "senior U.S. official," a "USAID official," or a "former NSC official."

ACRONYMS

Acronym	Definition
ALP	Afghan Local Police
ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
AWOL	Absent without leave
CERP	Commander's Emergency Response Program (DOD)
CRS	Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization (State)
CSTC-A	Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan
DOD	U.S. Department of Defense
GAO	U.S. Government Accountability Office
IED	Improvised explosive device
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
NSC	National Security Council
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
SEAL	U.S. Navy Sea, Air, and Land Teams
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
TAPI	Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USFOR-A	U.S. Forces – Afghanistan

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575 For example, before it closed in 2013, the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) proposed creating a U.S. Office of Contingency Operations (USOCO) that would report to the National Security Council. SIGIR argued that USOCO would ensure future stabilization and reconstruction efforts were civilian-led and would move planning and managing such operations from an additional duty at multiple agencies to the primary duty of one office. The proposal called for 250 personnel, at an annual cost of $25 million, during periods between large-scale stabilization and reconstruction efforts, which SIGIR assessed would be recouped by the waste USOCO averted. Ambassador Ryan Crocker also endorsed the idea, saying that creating a "lean institution dedicated to planning, preparing, and executing future [missions]" is the "surest path to correct the failures of the U.S. stabilization and reconstruction operations over the past three decades." Similarly, Guy C. Swan III, retired U.S. Army lieutenant general and former chief of staff for Multi-National Force–Iraq, said USOCO would be a "giant step forward." Other prominent officials who supported the concept include former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, Senator John McCain, former Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) Dov Zakheim, and Ambassador John Herbst, who led a similar effort at the State Department. In addition, bipartisan bills were introduced in the House of Representatives in both 2011 and 2013 that would have created USOCO. Ambassador John Herbst, testimony before the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, hearing on "Learning from Iraq: A Final Report from the Special Investigator General for Iraq Reconstruction," July 9, 2013; SIGIR, "Learning from Iraq: A Final Report from the Special Investigator General for Iraq Reconstruction," March 2013, pp. 122, 126, 128; James Stephenson, "Stabilization and Reconstruction in Conflict and Post-Conflict in 9/11," in *National Security Reform 2010: A Mid-Term Assessment*, ed. Joseph Cerami, Robert Dorff, and Matthew Harber, (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College 2011), p. 148; Steve Stockman, "Getting Stability and Reconstruction Ops Right. . . the Next Time," *Time*, July 26, 2013; Stuart Bowen, "Wanted: A Post-War Watchdog for Nation Building," *Defense One*, July 31, 2013; GovTrack, "H.R. 3660 (112th): Contingency Operations Oversight and Interagency Enhancement Act of 2011," legislative summary.

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The National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008 (P.L. 110-181) established the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).

SIGAR's oversight mission, as defined by the legislation, is to provide for the independent and objective

- conduct and supervision of audits and investigations relating to the programs and operations funded with amounts appropriated or otherwise made available for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.
- leadership and coordination of, and recommendations on, policies designed to promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness in the administration of the programs and operations, and to prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse in such programs and operations.
- means of keeping the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense fully and currently informed about problems and deficiencies relating to the administration of such programs and operation and the necessity for and progress on corrective action.

Afghanistan reconstruction includes any major contract, grant, agreement, or other funding mechanism entered into by any department or agency of the U.S. government that involves the use of amounts appropriated or otherwise made available for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Source: P.L. 110-181, "National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2008," 1/28/2008.

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All voicemail is in English and answered during business hours.

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