



PEACE AND SECURITY

»NEVER SAY NEVER«

Learning Lessons from Afghanistan Reviews

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This »review of reviews« looks at how and what Western governments and international organizations have tried to learn from the intervention in Afghanistan.



The fundamental lesson drawn is a warning: »Never say never.« While the era of massive intervention may be over, many of the same flaws that marred Western policy in Afghanistan remain relevant in Ukraine and elsewhere.



The reviews offer a wealth of lessons on setting and adapting realistic goals and strategies, using and producing knowledge, dealing with (il)legitimate government, and coordinating domestic and international actors.

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In this study, we undertake a review of reviews: we look at the processes and content of the most substantive reviews on the international intervention in Afghanistan conducted by various countries and international organizations carried out to date, with a view to learning from how others have tried to learn. We look at processes in terms of the format and organization of each review (its independence, membership, mandate, access to information, budget, etc.) and at content in terms of its main findings and recommendations. We have also sought to examine the implementation of lessons, looking – as far as possible – at whether the lessons identified have actually been learnt. Finally, we ask whether we can learn together. If Afghanistan has been a massive joint international endeavor, are there signs that different actors have jointly learned from it?



One of the most fundamental lessons to emerge from the reviews we examined is the warning we have used as the title of this report: »Never say never,« as former US diplomat Laurel Miller quotes the 1983 James Bond film, is a stark counterpoint to the common reading that the era of massive intervention is over and that most of the challenges faced in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 are irrelevant for the future. That would be a dangerous conclusion. There is a moral debt to the victims and casualties of the war to at least learn from the costly policy mistakes that were made. The historical reason is that we have seen the same story unfold over and over again. Some government will find itself embroiled again in some kind of complex state-building or counterinsurgency project. Furthermore, in Ukraine, Syria, coastal West Africa and elsewhere, many national, regional

and global actors are using the same bureaucracies, the same budgets, the same administrative systems and only slightly adapted strategies and tactics. There is no doubt that some learning has taken place, but many hard nuts have not been cracked and results remain mixed. In order to learn faster, more deeply and jointly, this study identifies key lessons in terms of objectives and strategies, interaction with an (il) legitimate government, knowledge use and coordination.

For further information on this topic:

<https://www.fes.de/themenportal-die-welt-gerecht-gestalten/frieden-und-sicherheit>

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»**Never say never**« is taken from the testimony given by Laurel E. Miller, president of the Asia Foundation and a former US diplomat, to the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on 17 November 2021. Full transcript: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/afghanistan-2001-2021-us-policy-lessons-learned>

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Acronyms

ARTF	Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund	SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (US)
CIMIC	Civil Military Cooperation	SU	Stabilisation Unit (UK)
COIN	Counterinsurgency	UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
CSO	Civil Society Organization	USAID	United States Agency for International Development
DFID	Department for International Cooperation (UK)	USIP	United States Institute for Peace
DIIS	Danish Institute for International Studies		
DOD	US Department of Defense		
EEAS	European Commission's External Action Service		
EUPOL	European Unit Police Mission		
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (UK)		
FIIA	Finnish Institute of International Affairs		
IOB	Evaluation Unit within the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs		
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force		
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (used in context of the Netherlands)		
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation		
MOD	Ministry of Defence (UK)		
NIOD	The Netherlands Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies		
NIMH	The Netherlands Institute of Military History		
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization		
NSC	National Security Council (used both in the US and UK context)		
OCSM	Office for Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation (UK)		
ODA	Official Development Assistance		
PCRU	Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit (UK)		
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team		
RSM	Resolute Support Mission		
R&R	Rest and Recreation		

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INTRODUCTION

Various official reviews have been carried out at different times during and after the twenty years of the massive intervention in Afghanistan by the United States and its allies, under a mandate from the UN Security Council. However, two of the largest contributors have yet to draw their official conclusions. When this study is published in early 2024, Germany's Study Commission on Afghanistan will be halfway through its two-year mandate to draw lessons from Germany's engagement in Afghanistan for its future integrated foreign, security and development policy. In the United States, the Afghanistan War Commission has only recently begun a process that will last until 2026.

In this study, we conduct a review of reviews: we look at the processes and content of the most substantial reviews conducted to date, with a view to learning from how others have tried to learn. We look at processes in terms of the format and organization of each review (its independence, membership, mandate, access to information, budget, etc.) and at substance in terms of its main findings and recommendations. We have also sought to examine the implementation of lessons, looking – as far as possible – at whether the lessons identified have actually been learnt. Finally, we ask whether we can learn together. If Afghanistan has been a massive joint international effort, is there any evidence that different actors are jointly learning from it?

After a comprehensive mapping of the many different types of reviews conducted by 12 major contributors to the intervention, including several international organizations,¹ we focused on six actors in particular, who followed very different processes for their reviews: Norway, Finland, the Netherlands, the US, the UK and NATO. In addition to these six actors, we briefly discuss the processes in Denmark and Australia, as well as the reviews conducted in the context of the European Union (EU) and the UN. Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of these reviews: their mandates, format and impact to date. We also acknowledge the reviews undertaken in Sweden and Canada (with an initial report in 2008), but have not included them due to the limited scope of the study. We also note that other countries engaged in Afghanistan have undertaken various evaluations of projects

or individual components of their missions, but to our knowledge have not undertaken more comprehensive reviews (e.g. Japan, France and Italy).

While the various learning endeavors we analyzed have different names, forms and audiences – such as evaluations, inquiries, investigations, assessments or simply studies or reports – we use the generic term »review« to describe all formats, regardless of their specific nature. Some were tasked to cover their government's or international organization's entire work in Afghanistan, others had a scope limited to a certain sector (e.g. development aid or civil-military cooperation), or to an individual country's contributions to an integrated mission (e.g. to ISAF or RSM). The timeframes covered varied as well. We aimed to select the most comprehensive reviews and excluded project evaluations or specific investigations, for example into war crimes by specific military units. Unless otherwise stated, this report draws on interviews with those involved in the various review processes.²

Across these reviews, we have identified four substantive areas of key findings. We present these findings, and where they agree or disagree across these four broad areas, in Chapter 3:

- Objectives: What were we trying to achieve in Afghanistan?
- Knowledge, contextual understanding and learning: What did we (try to) know about the country? How did we use knowledge for learning and change?
- (Il)legitimate government, state-building and aid: What did we know about what we were doing?
- National and international coordination: What were the gaps and what mechanisms were needed to fill them? What are the limits to cooperation and integration?

Chapter 4 sets out our main conclusions and recommendations. The reviews we looked at were consistent in taking a very sober view of the outcome of the intervention. Norway's Royal Commission on Afghanistan was an early example of

¹ Australia, Denmark, Canada, Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States as well as the United Nations, European Union and NATO.

² We interviewed two dozen stakeholders and experts involved in the various review processes that this report focuses on. All interviews were on background. Apart from a few exceptions (with the specific approval given by interviewees), we do not mention the interviewees and do not link the information in this report to specific interviewees.

a self-critical tone. Already in 2016, it found that despite the country's efforts, »the situation remains discouraging« and that »overall, Norway's contribution did not make a significant difference to the international mission in Afghanistan.«³ Admitting failure, with important nuances, has become more common in the years since. But admitting failure is necessary but not sufficient for learning: the right lessons must not only be learned, but also implemented to prevent history from repeating itself.

³ The Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan (2016) *A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan 2001–2014*, p. 11.

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MANDATES, FORMATS, AND OUTPUTS

A wide variety of mandates and formats have been used to review the engagement of countries and organizations in Afghanistan. The comprehensive reviews, both in terms of process and product, selected as the basis for this study are mostly meta-reviews that build on a wide range of previous reports and evaluations, either conducted by the reviewing body itself or by other institutions and actors, including ministries, implementing agencies, NGOs, think tanks, and international organizations.

The mandates for these processes have come either from parliaments (as in the case of Finland, Denmark, and the US Afghanistan War Commission) or from the executive, through heads of government or organizations (as in the case of the Chilcot Inquiry in the UK, or following a mandate from the Secretary General of NATO), or from government institutions with an explicit mandate to carry out reviews and evaluations (for example, the Evaluation Unit within the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs [IOB]).

In terms of content, the mandates have provided the basis for the analysis of strategy and implementation since 2001 in various policy areas, either to determine performance in specific areas and/or to show how the areas interacted nationally and/or internationally in their attempts to achieve common goals. What these goals were and why a country

was involved are also often addressed. All of the mandates reviewed were asked to identify lessons for the country conducting review that are relevant to future engagements in fragile contexts. Mandates awarded after August 2021 also included the question of why the fall of the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan occurred despite twenty years of international support efforts (for example, the ongoing Danish inquiry conducted by the Danish Institute for International Studies [DIIS]). Mandates have often been and continue to be broad, giving the commission, research team or institution considerable leeway in specifying more detailed research questions and approaches. In most cases, the mandates cover the engagement in Afghanistan specifically, but in some cases, the interventions in Afghanistan are analyzed in comparison to other fragile and conflict-affected contexts (as done by the Netherlands, for example), or another context is analyzed but lessons are also identified for the engagement in Afghanistan (the Chilcot Inquiry on Iraq in the United Kingdom).

As a result of such a wide range of mandates, the various review efforts cover different parts of many different analytical focus areas. Extending a basic taxonomy developed by Stepputat for his review of the Danish engagement,⁴ we found the following:

	Country X harmonization with international activities	Country X coherence (cross-government)	Country X (and international) alignment with local and national actors	Overall plausibility/fitness for purpose
Strategic level – Analysis – Strategy	Particularly with most important partner countries (US) and NATO, the EU, UN	Ministries, NGO, intelligence services	Relations with central government	Strategic assumptions, theory of change
Implementation – Planning – Coordination – Monitoring – Feedback	E.g. ISAF, EU and UN missions	Coordination units, battalions, development actors, CIMIC, etc.	Relations with local government, contractors, local NGOs, factions, etc.	Internal delivery mechanisms, diplomatic/development/military/police staffing and practices

(based on Stepputat, adapted and expanded)

⁴ Stepputat, F. (2009) *Synthesis Report: Civil Military Relations in International Operations – A Danish Perspective*, DIIS Report 2009:16, p. 19.

While some reviews are very clear about the level of analysis they address, others consciously or unconsciously combine levels. However, there is a tendency for national reviews to focus more on national intergovernmental coherence than on harmonization with international partners or local/host country actors. It is striking that many smaller countries' reviews focus heavily on their failures and successes in harmonizing, coordinating, or aligning their efforts with others (the first three columns above), while reviews of larger countries review do not. We added the fourth column, dealing with the extent to which was undertaken were appropriate at all, and how effective they were.

The formats cover a wide range of approaches, from independent commissions (Norway, the US), to reports by independent research institutes commissioned by the government (Denmark, Finland), to evaluations carried out by specially commissioned departments within ministries (Netherlands), to internal studies whose findings are published only in summary form (NATO).

The main difference in formats and results of reviews can be summarized as follows:

- **Resources.** They range from 3 months of desk research by a single author to several years with larger research teams, including travel expenses (in some cases including to Afghanistan before 2021) and extensive scope for interviewing. The US Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) even maintained a large permanent presence in Afghanistan.
- **Methodology.** Comprehensive reviews make use of desk studies, either with the aim of providing full meta-reviews (Netherlands) or through the selective selection of secondary sources, public and/or confidential individual interviews and hearings, and focus group discussions.
- **Access to classified documents.** A key question is whether access to classified documents was requested and/or granted, with interviewees mentioning pros and cons for both approaches. From a research perspective, access provides a rare window into the workings of government. The question, however, is how to present this knowledge in public reports. As one interviewee pointed out, classified content often cannot be revealed, but it gives reviewers a better sense of the big picture and where else to look. In other cases, such access has led to the declassification of certain documents.
- **Attributions of (mis)conduct and tone.** While some reviews attempt to draw general lessons without explicitly assigning responsibility and blame (e.g. Finland), others follow an audit logic and aim to specifically address the conduct of the actors involved (SIGAR). Any judgment on the overall tone is subjective – for example, some commissioners would conclude that the Norwegian report »A Good Ally« is strikingly critical, while others would judge that it is a compromise and therefore not critical enough. Nevertheless, it can be said that some review processes are more political in nature (US, UK), while others aim to be more removed from political fault lines, focusing on technical elements or a historical approach to provide documentation for contemporary history and learning.
- **Final products.** These can range from single final reports of 200–300 pages (Norway, Finland) to a compilation of reports or volumes of several hundreds if not over a thousand pages (SIGAR, UK Chilcot Inquiry, Dutch reports building on a pyramid of detailed sub-reports).
- **Language.** This study examines reports published or translated into English. Providing findings in the local language of the country being evaluated, as well as in English, is certainly a helpful practice for comparing processes and lessons learned. We find that a best practice is to translate findings, at least their summaries, into Dari and/or Pashto, as was done in the comprehensive Finnish report published in 2023.

Regarding the outcomes and impacts of the various review processes, it is difficult to establish causality between the findings and recommendations of the reports on the one hand, and changes in government, civil society and/or organizational policies and practices on the other. Reviews have at times played an important role in how the engagement in Afghanistan has been and is perceived by the public, but whether they have led to changes in policy and implementation is harder to determine. One reason for this is that the people who conduct the reviews are often not the same as those who implement their recommendations.

For many of those interviewed for this study, the Norwegian Commission and its subsequent report »A Good Ally« stand out as having an exemplary function for subsequent reviews. It is perceived as the first report to provide a high quality, critical analysis, an authoritative voice, and thus longer-term relevance. Many other review processes have built on the work of the Norwegian Commission, including through consultation with Commission members and the Secretariat.

The potential outcomes and impact of the various review processes in the Netherlands are also worth mentioning. An independent review of the engagement in Kunduz brought to light misreporting by various ministries. Now, certain military missions (those that fall under article 100 of the Dutch constitution) need to be evaluated by an independent party. One year after the IOB publishes a report, a meeting is organized with the relevant government agencies to discuss which lessons have been addressed and implemented. In addition to the in-depth evaluations by the IOB, the Dutch government also conducts a four-year historical review by two institutions, which combines an evaluation approach with a historical perspective.

It is important to bear in mind that each report and structure reflects the zeitgeist in which it was published: what could be said critically in the 2000s probably took more courage than the post-»failure« openness seen in the post-2021 reports. The following sections provide overviews of specific efforts by countries and organizations to assess their engagement in Afghanistan. We aim to summarize contexts, mandates and formats (or explain their absence) and, where possible, outcomes or impacts. Again, the summaries below do not

purport to be a complete review of all review efforts, but rather provide a broader overview of debates and processes. They are presented in alphabetical order.

2.1 AUSTRALIA

In Australia, there has been no comprehensive review of the Afghanistan intervention to date. The dominant issue in public discussion of Afghanistan remains a long-running inquiry into war crimes committed by Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan. This inquiry, led by the Inspector General of the Australian Defence Force, ran from 2006 to 2020 and produced what is commonly known as the Brereton Report.⁵ In addition, the Australian Senate asked its Foreign Affairs, Defense and Trade References Committee to review the entirety of Australia's engagement in Afghanistan, but the latter ended up producing numerous reports that focused overwhelmingly on the 2021 withdrawal, the government's support for its Afghan local staff, and the shortcomings of Australia's visa program for Afghan refugees.⁶

2.2 DENMARK

Denmark has conducted several reviews of the Afghanistan mission. The first major review was conducted in 2009 on civil-military relations in Iraq and Afghanistan, commissioned by the Danish government and carried out by the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS). The aim was to »contribute to a revision of the Danish Concerted Planning Action strategy from 2004 in relation to the new parliamentary defense agreement from 2010–14.«⁷ This was followed by three major reviews commissioned by several political parties that supported Denmark's involvement in Afghanistan. These evaluations covered the period from 2001 to 2014, the year that marked the transition to Afghan leadership initiated by the end of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom – Afghanistan. The reports presented in 2016 covered three different aspects: international lessons from integrated approaches (research carried out by DIIS),⁸ development cooperation (research conducted by Landell Mills),⁹ and thirdly, civil-military lessons learned (researched by Forsvarsakademiet).¹⁰ The current inquiry – i.e. an independent, research-based inquiry – was agreed upon by the majority of political parties of the Danish Parliament

on 3 Dec 2021 and includes the Danish authorities' report on the evacuation and the historical analysis of Denmark's military and civilian engagement in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. It is currently being conducted by the DIIS.¹¹

While it is difficult to assess the impact of these studies, it is striking that the 2009 report clearly identifies key challenges early on and makes recommendations that are consistent with later reports (lack of internationally shared analyses and strategic frameworks, better use of local knowledge, early attention to subnational levels, lack of systematic and joined-up monitoring, reporting and evaluation, better qualified staff, etc.). Therefore, the key question remains why these lessons and recommendations were not identified earlier. In a later article, Stepputat, as coordinating author of the report, notes that »policy-related knowledge production is a negotiated, social process that involves informal practices and defensive tactics. The policy process seems to be less concerned with the effects on the ground than with the problem of creating unity among a wide range of agents and institutions involved in the emerging policy field.«¹²

2.3 EUROPEAN UNION

Following the fall of the Afghan Republic, the European Commission's External Action Service (EEAS) launched a review of the EU's engagement in Afghanistan in autumn 2021. As the findings were not made public, the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) commissioned a further report. The decision to commission this report was reportedly driven by frustration within the AFET that the Commission had not shared its report. The commissioned report was carried out by one person, Oz Hassan, with a restricted timeline of September to December 2022. The author was given full access to EU staff for interviews. The final AFET report was published in January 2023, entitled »Afghanistan: Lessons learnt from 20 years of supporting democracy, development and security« and discusses various topics – historical context, state-building, regional strategy, bilateral assistance, political dialogue, peacebuilding, collapse – and makes 32 recommendations.¹³

The European Commission has been criticized for not making the results of its review public. However, like the UN and NATO, the Commission is in a difficult position because it depends on the support of member states. This is even more the case for the Commission now that the EEAS has resumed operations in Afghanistan. The EU is now in a unique position to provide added value with an operational EU delegation in Kabul, while EU member states' embassies in Kabul remain closed. Nevertheless, a public debate on the findings of the

⁵ See <https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/afghanistan-inquiry> for details and the public version of the report.

⁶ The Australian parliament has the reports available at https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Afghanistanengagement

⁷ Stepputat, F. (2009) *Synthesis Report: Civil Military Relations in International Operations – A Danish Perspective*, DIIS Report 2009:16, p. 6.

⁸ Andersen, L.R. (2016) *Afghanistan Lessons Identified 2001–2014 Part 1 – International Lessons from Integrated Approaches in Afghanistan*, DIIS.

⁹ Ball, N. et al. (2016) *Afghanistan Lessons Identified 2001–2014 Part II – Development Cooperation in Afghanistan*, Landell Mill.

¹⁰ Andersen, S.B. et al. (2018) *Afghanistan Lessons Identified 2001–2014 Part III – Dankse erfaringer med stabiliseringsprojekter og CIMIC*, Forsvarsakademiet.

¹¹ DIIS (2023) *Commissioned inquiry into Denmark's engagement in Afghanistan 2001–2021 (webpage)*

¹² Stepputat, F. (2012) *Knowledge production in the security-development nexus: An ethnographic reflection*, *Security Dialogue* 43(5), pp. 439–455, p. 439.

¹³ Oz Hassan (2023) *Afghanistan: Lessons learnt from 20 years of supporting democracy, development and security*, European Parliament, Study requested by the AFET Committee, PE 702.579.

review could help shape future engagement in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the European Parliament's report has received little attention, and it is uncertain whether it will lead to any long-term learning, particularly within the Commission.

2.4 FINLAND

In Finland, a first comprehensive assessment of the country's role in Afghanistan and its participation in stabilization and reconstruction efforts was commissioned by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Finnish Parliament in 2021 (entitled UavP 61/2021).¹⁴ The research was carried out by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA), where a team of up to eight researchers worked on the report until the end of 2022. The English translation was published in June 2023, with minor updates to reflect the fact that Finland had joined NATO in April 2023. The five-page executive summary of the report was translated into Dari.

The call for an independent investigation was made – as in various other contexts – in the aftermath of the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on 15 August 2021. The mandate given to the FIIA was not »business as usual.« The Institute was given sufficient resources, a high degree of independence and a mandate to define its approach. It was framed by the FIIA as an assessment rather than an evaluation in the strict and more technical sense. The goal, according to the lead researcher, was not to blame institution X or Y, but to critically reflect on why Finland got involved, the logic behind its activities, and how to learn comprehensively for future crises and conflicts. The result is a detailed report of 214 pages.

The report finds that there were multiple objectives, some of which were in part unclear and sometimes contradictory. The government's public messaging centered on Finland's goal of stabilizing and supporting Afghanistan to enhance international peace and security – including in the areas of development, good governance, rule of law, and the rights of women and girls. The research subsumes this under the framework of »Finland as a benefactor.« The second objective was to maintain and strengthen foreign and security policy relations with the United States and other international partners. This is framed as »Finland as a partner.« The third framework, »Finland as a learner,« outlines the skills and capabilities acquired, particularly at the operational and technical military and crisis management level, which – in the context of 2022 – can also be linked to Finland's path to NATO partnership. Tensions between these different roles increased as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated and the nature of the engagement became more conflicting.

The report emphasizes that »it is almost impossible to assess to what extent Finland achieved its objectives in Afghanistan, because no clear and transparent objectives had been set. Based on our interviews, Finland's involvement benefited its

transatlantic relations, Nordic cooperation and position in the international community.« However, it is difficult to assess what this has meant for Finland's relations with the US and whether its activities have been cost-effective in terms of partnership objectives and national capacities.¹⁵

Given the very recent publication date of the report, it may be too early to judge its impact. The findings were critically discussed in expert circles, in parliament, in key ministries, and with the wider public immediately after the reports were published – at the national level, and then again at the international/European level for the launch of the English report. However, given that the report is produced by an independent institute, the concrete follow-up is in the hands of other actors within the government. Second, developments in international politics influenced the report. When it was commissioned, the war against Ukraine had not yet begun. In 2022, attention was elsewhere, which allowed the research to be conducted freely and with less sensitivity. At the same time, there was and is a strong sense that the Afghanistan experience is no longer critical because other crises and geopolitical shifts are more pressing at the moment. In terms of lessons learned for the future, the need for more realism, transparency, and clearer, more context-specific goals stood out.

2.5 NATO

NATO's decision to review its engagement in Afghanistan was the result of NATO ambassadors lobbying Secretary General Stoltenberg after August 2021. Stoltenberg ultimately agreed and appointed John Manza, former Assistant Secretary General for Operations, to lead the review. John Manza brought in a team of experts from different NATO countries, such as former White House »war czar« Douglas Lute, with different areas of expertise. The window for the review was relatively restrictive, about two months (September-October 2021), but it was independent and well resourced for experts and travel. The review process and the subsequent chapters of the report were structured around different phases of the international intervention, with different experts working on these phases in parallel. Each chapter of the report concludes with a summary of key lessons learned. The final report was shared with the allies in December 2021.

The impact of the review has been limited. One of the people involved in the process concluded, »the findings are very basic – but capitals are still unaware of these fundamentals.« The final report was first watered down under political pressure and then classified, according to some, not because of the secret nature of the report, but because of political concerns that its contents could be embarrassing and potentially damaging to NATO's position. Crucially, there is no longer any interest at the Pentagon and limited interest within NATO in thinking about Afghanistan. This has made it easier to have critical discussions about NATO's role.

¹⁴ Mustasilta, K. et al. (2023) *Finland in Afghanistan 2001–2021: From Stabilization to Advancing Foreign and Security Policy Relations*, FIIA Report 72.

¹⁵ Mustasilta, K. et al. (2023) *Finland in Afghanistan 2001–2021: From Stabilization to Advancing Foreign and Security Policy Relations*, FIIA Report 72, p. 15.

Conversely, at a time of war in Ukraine and growing concern about the role of China, few are looking back and even fewer believe that Afghanistan can provide useful lessons for the new geopolitical environment. Moreover, some within NATO suggest that the organization missed an opportunity to learn broader institutional lessons by focusing too much on a US-centric military perspective during the review. For example, former NATO Head of Operations for Afghanistan and Iraq Nicholas Williams argues that the key lesson from Afghanistan is that »NATO lost political control of the ISAF operation,« which was not taken into account in the review.

NATO's review process was certainly important in allowing for reflection and lesson learning. However, the process was extremely short, making thorough engagement difficult. In addition, the process faced political resistance and the final report was ultimately classified, making public discussion of NATO's role in Afghanistan and the scope of the review much more difficult. There are no accountability or follow-up mechanisms within NATO to ensure that the findings are actually implemented, and NATO's shift in focus to Ukraine has diminished any remaining interest in learning from past interventions. Furthermore, the process largely reflects the broader power dynamics within NATO. As a result, the review is primarily focused on US military thinking. Finally, the NATO case illustrates that international organizations, which are primarily accountable to and dependent on their member states rather than the general public, have a different and perhaps more difficult role to play in ensuring a transparent and inclusive process.

2.6 THE NETHERLANDS

In the Dutch context, several reviews have been published on different elements of the country's engagement in Afghanistan. These include two reviews focusing on the security sector in Afghanistan¹⁶ and a study on stability, security and the rule of law in the conflicts in Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan.¹⁷

These reports were either conducted or commissioned by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The IOB is an independent unit within the MFA that submits its evaluations directly to Parliament. The government, through the Minister of Foreign Affairs, receives a copy before publication, but does not have to sign off on the report and has no influence over it. All MFA subsidies larger in scale than EUR 5 million must be evaluated by another independent party. Additionally, there is a legal obligation to conduct a »Periodic Review« of policies every five to seven years. In addition, the IOB conducts cross-departmental, country-specific reviews and

may initiate its own reviews and developments on issues it deems important, independent of specific projects. The IOB's evaluation process is based on a review of available literature and documents, including full access to all classified documents, and interviews. Furthermore, the process can also include other research methods (surveys, statistical analysis, etc.), field work and primary data collection.

Over time, the IOB has also been involved in independent reviews of Dutch military contributions. Dutch contributions to missions under Article 100 of the Dutch Constitution are subject to an obligation to evaluate the mission after its completion. A first IOB review of the Dutch integrated mission in the Afghan province of Kunduz between 2011 and 2013, which uncovered serious misreporting by the the Ministries of Defense, Foreign Affairs and Justice and Security to parliament, was published in 2019. Following this review and its findings, all Dutch military operations must be independently evaluated. In addition to the evaluations carried out by the IOB, the NIOD Center for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies and the Institute for Military History (NIMH) have started a multi-year historical research project, mandated by parliament, which is ongoing. This will be the first comprehensive Dutch historical-scientific study on the subject, divided into nine sub-studies.

While it is too early to assess the extent to which the lessons from Afghanistan will be implemented, the IOB has generally had some success in implementing its recommendations due to certain built-in mechanisms. Pressure on the ministries to actually do so is exerted by the discussion of the findings in parliament and in the media. In addition, there is a check-in after one year in which the ministries in question have to discuss with the IOB how the recommendations have been implemented. In addition, long-term projects or issues may be evaluated repeatedly over time, allowing the IOB to remind relevant ministries of recommendations that have not been implemented. However, entities addressed tend to prioritize the more technical and easier to implement recommendations over the larger political ones.

Even though evaluations in the Dutch system are conducted »in-house,« it is one of the most powerful mechanisms we looked at. More technical in nature – especially when compared to processes such as the Norwegian review (see below), which examined the objectives of the intervention in Afghanistan in detail – the IOB evaluations focus on the role of Dutch ministries, especially MFA and Defense. Nevertheless, the evaluation does take some account of the political dynamics, and the IOB also conducts interviews with members of parliament when necessary. The more technical nature has its advantages. The Afghanistan reviews had to be done because of set criteria and not because of political dynamics. The IOB is well resourced and has access to all the documents necessary for a thorough evaluation, rather than having to be established for each review. Most importantly, the IOB has built-in mechanisms to ensure at least a limited degree of impact and follow-up.

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) (2023) *Between wish and reality. Evaluation of the Dutch contribution to Resolute Support*.

¹⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) (2023) *Inconvenient Realities: An evaluation of Dutch contributions to stability, security and rule of law in fragile and conflict-affected contexts*.

2.7 NORWAY

Norway has an established format for conducting independent reviews, a commission of experts formally appointed by the King. Such commissions are well respected and tend to receive considerable public attention in Norway. Over the years, hundreds of such reviews have been conducted on various issues. On November 21, 2014, an independent commission, officially called »The Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan,« was established by royal decree. It worked under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which provided the resources. Its official mandate was to draw lessons from Norway's civilian and military involvement in Afghanistan during the period 2001–2014. The commission published its final report in Norwegian in June 2016, and in English in February 2018.¹⁸

The commission was chaired by Bjørn Tore Godal, a prominent member of the Labor Party who has held several senior government positions, including Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs (1994–1997) and Minister of Defense (2001–2001). In addition, the Commission consisted of nine other members and was supported by a full-time secretariat. The natural focus of the analysis at the time was Norway's involvement in ISAF. The analysis was structured around themes – such as the decision to go to war and human rights – and relied on interviews and documents to examine these issues. The independent commission was given extensive powers and resources to carry out its analysis. Resources included the experts, the full-time secretariat, which had five staff members in addition to its director, and resources for travel.

Although the Commission could not summon people for interviews, its official and high-level status gave it sufficient perceived importance that most interviews usually took place in Norway. The Commission maintained a high level of confidentiality, for example by conducting some interviews in a surveillance-proof environment, to ensure that people felt comfortable talking. Crucially, a royal decree ensured that people could talk about classified matters and would not face any consequences for speaking openly. In addition, the Commission was given access to all classified documents from key ministries, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence and, on request, the Intelligence Service, and even the minutes of cabinet meetings, which are confidential in Norway. This was unprecedented in Norwegian history. While much of the work was done in Norway and focused on people and documents there, the Commission traveled to Brussels, London, Kabul, and Washington, D.C., among other places. The Commission interacted with national bodies, such as SIGAR in the United States, and international bodies, such as NATO. In addition, the Commission hired an Afghan NGO to investigate the condition of Norwegian-funded schools in Faryab Province.

In accordance with the Commission's terms of reference, the report was finally submitted to the government and presented at an event. As Parliament had been the driving force behind the review, it also requested a briefing as part of the annual Afghanistan debate. And indeed, the report quickly received widespread media attention in Norway. The report was also widely recognized internationally, especially as it was one of the first comprehensive reviews of the Afghanistan engagement, apart from the Danish review. To this day, the Norwegian review is widely regarded as one of the most honest and thorough reports on any country's involvement in Afghanistan. International recognition of the report was helped by the decision to translate the findings into English, making them more accessible.

In the long run, however, the report had little impact, in part because of a lack of follow-up mechanisms. The report was largely ignored by the government and there was little sustained public debate. Most importantly, there was no process to ensure that the lessons learned were actually implemented after the final report was published. While important lessons were distilled, widely reported and debated in parliament, they did not translate into major changes in Norwegian policymaking over time.

Ultimately, the report is best seen as an »authoritative history« of the Norwegian engagement in Afghanistan, as one of our key informants put it. It provides a comprehensive understanding of the context of the interventions, their goals, their evolution over time, and their successes and failures. Because the report takes into account classified documents, many of which are likely to remain classified for decades, it is a treasure trove for scholars.

2.8 THE UNITED NATIONS

Following an internal review, the United Nations conducted an independent assessment of its mission as mandated by the Security Council (Security Council Resolution 2679, 2023). In April 2023, UN Secretary-General Guterres appointed Feridun Sinirlioğlu, former Foreign Minister of Turkey, as the Special Coordinator for the Independent Assessment. The independent assessment was completed in November 2023 (S/2023/856) and discussed by the Security Council at its meeting on the situation in Afghanistan on 20 December 2023. The report is not an assessment of the UN's past role in Afghanistan, but a forward-looking report that suggests a way forward for international engagement with the Taliban. Among other things, the report proposes an intra-Afghan dialogue, the establishment of an international contact group, and the appointment of a special envoy. With regard to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the report concludes: »UNAMA, through its mandate to monitor, report and engage on a range of topics at the national and subnational levels, has played an important role as a bridge between the international com-

¹⁸ The Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan (2016) *A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan 2001–2014*; for a good overview also see Mats Berdal & Astri Suhrke (2017) *A Good Ally – Norway and International Statebuilding in Afghanistan, 2001–2014*, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41 (1–2): 61–88.

munity and Afghans. It should continue its work in support of deepening engagement.«¹⁹

2.9 UNITED KINGDOM

To date, there has not been a comprehensive review of Afghanistan in the United Kingdom, largely as a result of government resistance after the grueling experience of the Chilcot Inquiry into Iraq. Small inquiries by individual parliamentary committees and a very specific criminal investigation into allegations of extrajudicial killings by members of British military police units do not amount to a broader review of the country's role in the international intervention as a whole.

Chilcot, however, is a very relevant special case for the subject of this study. The Chilcot Inquiry is remembered as bruising in London not primarily for its damning conclusions for the Blair government, which went to war in Iraq in 2003 on the basis of flawed and in part manipulated intelligence, but because it required enormous amounts of staff time across government departments. The resulting report comprises 16 volumes and many thousands of pages – by far the largest body of work of its kind, except perhaps the collected works of SIGAR in the US. In its thoroughness, it also examined in meticulous detail those challenges of the Iraq war that would haunt the UK in Afghanistan – notably counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and state-building in the midst of civil war, with the role of capacity-building for security forces, governance and the rule of law, stabilization, and the politics of reconciliation in a divided society. For British politics and society, it asked many of the same fundamental questions that would be asked about Afghanistan, providing some basis for the government's claim that another such report would be politically redundant, Afghan specifics aside.

Chilcot's findings, along with many smaller, bureaucratically driven evaluations and learning exercises on stabilization in Iraq and Afghanistan, clearly influenced the development of key concepts in key parts of the British foreign policy system, from intelligence and diplomacy to stabilization and military doctrine.

2.10 UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The United States has only just begun its official comprehensive review of the Afghanistan war, in August 2023. The congressionally mandated Afghanistan War Commission is not expected to report until 2026. Meanwhile, among NATO allies, the United States is the country with by far the largest and most diverse set of analytical assessments, critical reviews, audits, and evaluations of the intervention and war conducted by the administrations of Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden between 2001 and 2021. The reports of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR),

a temporary agency created by Congress in 2008 for the duration of the intervention, stand out as the most official body of work in this regard, one that goes far beyond the narrow confines of an audit agency.

With a mandate not only to identify and prosecute criminal wrongdoing, such as fraud and corruption, but also to identify shortcomings and lessons for the effective conduct of the »reconstruction« portion of the mission very broadly defined to include not only civilian assistance but also, for example, the training of Afghan security forces-SIGAR's teams in Kabul and Washington became a trusted source of independent and rigorous analysis that often contradicted overly rosy official assessments. It was only in the final years of the war, and especially after the August 2021 drawdown, that partisan incentives to support SIGAR as a tool for Congressional Republicans to attack the Biden administration began to tarnish the agency's reputation for impartiality. Unlike any of the other audits examined for this study, SIGAR is first and foremost a congressionally mandated US audit agency. While the quasi-prosecutorial powers of its investigators are of little importance to its analytical and learning work, SIGAR's format as an independent agency headed by a single individual – the same person, John F. Sopko, for more than a decade now – sets it apart from the commissions and multi-author studies found in many other countries. SIGAR is also by far the best-resourced »review body.« As of 2019, it had 189 staff, 30 of whom were based in Afghanistan, and an annual budget of nearly 55 million US dollars.²⁰

SIGAR's influence can be found in policy white papers such as the US Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (following the Global Fragility Act) and recent papers on stabilization, as well as technical details of legal regulation and operations, rather than in grand strategy or the US government's overall tools for assisting other countries in conflict. The government machinery that implements current US assistance to Ukraine has been accused of suffering from the same weaknesses in identifying risks of waste, abuse, and corruption as assistance to Afghanistan, as key deficiencies identified by SIGAR have not been effectively addressed.

¹⁹ United Nations Security Council (2023) *Letter dated 8 November 2023 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2023/856, Annex: Report of the independent assessment pursuant to Security Council resolution 2679 (2023)*.

²⁰ US Special Inspector-General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2017) *Fiscal Year 2019 Budget Request*, p. 15.

3

LESSONS IDENTIFIED

3.1 GOALS AND STRATEGIES

In many of the reviews we examined, the goals of the intervention in Afghanistan are criticized as unclear and unrealistic. However, the retrospective discussion differs fundamentally between the lead partner—the United States—and the smaller partners. Among the smaller partners, all the reviews examined note that the goals of the intervention were ambiguous and conflicting, as means and ends were interpreted differently, especially with regard to the relationship between counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and state-building. Some felt that important goals were unrealistic. In addition, the goal of being a »good ally« to the US – not coincidentally the title of the Norwegian Royal Commission report—and whether and how to acknowledge this goal play a major role in the discussion.

In the US discussion, by contrast, the role of allies is mostly an afterthought. In essence, the debate over the successes and failures of »The American War in Afghanistan,« as a recent book is titled, continues to focus solely on US contributions and US mistakes.²¹ Implicitly, at least, US policymakers and analysts seem convinced that the more than 50 allies who contributed to the war in Afghanistan were not decisive in determining what went well and what went wrong—the US role was simply too overwhelming to conclude otherwise. As for the substance of US objectives and strategy, the jury is still out – that is, the Afghanistan War Commission, whose mandate is to provide an authoritative review on political matters rather than technical assessments and audits; its report is not expected until 2026. Current debates, however, provide some direction: Even if the primary US political goal has been clear officially, to prevent another 9/11 by denying transnational terrorist groups the use of Afghan soil—the subordinate question of how to achieve this in Afghanistan has produced fundamentally conflicting operational objectives, many of which are now judged to be unrealistic.

AMERICAN GOALS IN AFGHANISTAN

The substance and clarity of America's strategic goals are a fundamentally political question, one that is essentially outside the mandate of the only major official source of US assessments to date, the work of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) (see Chapter 2). From its bottom-up perspective on the many large and complicated programs attempting to »rebuild« the Afghan security forces and economy, SIGAR found that the US government has been unable to develop and implement a coherent strategy.

At the same time, the top-down policy perspective is quite different. In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, US Ambassador Ryan Crocker argued forcefully against a »mistaken impression that successive administrations have been confused over what that policy actually was. That is not the case.« In fact, Crocker said, the overarching strategic goal was »to ensure that Afghan soil would never again be used to launch an attack on the American homeland. ... Everything else was about ways and means.« He goes on to explain how this primary goal was linked by the Bush administration to the need for regime change against the Taliban, which in turn was understood to require state-building to create an effective partner to control the countryside.²²

This line of argument, consistent with many of the key players' own statements and memoirs, holds that not all sources are equal and that context matters: If politicians other than the president emphasized some of these subordinate goals, whether democracy, the rule of law, or women's rights, and even if Presidents Bush, Obama, Trump, or Biden occasionally expressed the goals in ways that seemed equal or even in a different order, these were either tactical choices in the context of real debates about the relationships among these subordinate goals, or effects of the particular context of a speech or document. However, the idea that the US is in Afghanistan to build a rights-respecting democracy must be understood in the successive contexts of, first, a neo-conservative period under George W. Bush in which the US

²¹ Carter Malkesjian (2021) *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*, Oxford University Press.

²² Ryan Crocker (2021) *Afghanistan 2001–2021: US Policy Lessons Learned*, Testimony before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, November 17.

invaded Iraq to »spread freedom« and, second, a President Barack Obama who framed his decisions as deeply informed by liberal values. It was this context that led many Afghans and allies to believe in these lofty goals, especially in the early days after the intervention. Their subsequent disappointment and the strategic confusion that followed is therefore quite relevant.

Notwithstanding this confusion, the undisputed secondary goals – or what Crocker calls »ways and means« – are now seen as unrealistic in the first place: Was it ever possible to exclude the Taliban from Afghanistan’s new political settlement by »defeating« them militarily? Was it possible to build an electoral democracy and a largely formal, »modern« justice system to provide the kind of fair and effective governance necessary to deny the Taliban a new foothold in Afghan society? Did the US and its allies have the resources and staying power for successful state-building or counterinsurgency? These debates are very much unresolved in the United States, and they form a large part of the to-do list for the newly established Afghanistan War Commission, which is expected to complete its work in 2026. In the meantime, SIGAR’s indictment is largely about the coherence of subordinate goals and their implementation—a theme we will return to below (Section 3.4).

ALLIES’ GOALS IN AFGHANISTAN

Among America’s allies, the »means« and »ends« of the intervention have been similarly debated extensively, with goals and strategies often found to be ambiguous and unrealistic.

In contrast to the debates in the United States, however, there is much more discussion among the allies about their relationships with their partners – especially with the United States. The Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan identified the strategic goal »to maintain good relations with the US and help to ensure NATO’s relevance« as a priority for Norway. The Commission concluded that Norway’s main goal was to be seen as »A Good Ally« – a title that ensured high political visibility beyond the country’s borders. While the report notes that Norway’s military contribution »did not influence the big picture in Afghanistan,« the country succeeded in demonstrating its position as a loyal partner.²³ Similarly, the Dutch review highlights the relationship with Germany. It notes that being a good partner was a key objective, to the extent that known obstacles to success were ignored. »These factors were known before the Resolute Support Mission (RSM) started, and they made it unlikely that RSM would achieve its objectives. However, in the decision by the Cabinet to take part in RSM, the question to which extent it could be expected that RSM would achieve its stated objectives played a secondary role. More important

to the Cabinet were the wish to show solidarity to its allies and to cooperate with Germany.«²⁴

The Finnish review is an example of one that is deeply concerned with the problems of the intervention’s objectives. »Multiple objectives that were partly unclear and at times conflicting,« it concludes. While multiple objectives are not in themselves a problem, the report argues, tensions arose as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated. In the absence of a clear and transparent set of objectives, it was more difficult to develop an adapted plan of action and to evaluate activities.²⁵ Much of the blame lies with the Finnish government’s misleading narrative at home: public messaging centered on Finland’s goal of stabilizing and supporting Afghanistan to enhance international peace and security – including in the areas of development, good governance, rule of law, and women’s and girls’ rights – while hiding the fact that it was motivated by fostering its relationship with the United States. Ultimately, the Finnish report concludes that »it is almost impossible to assess to what extent Finland achieved its objectives in Afghanistan, because no clear and transparent objectives had been set. Based on our interviews, Finland’s involvement benefited its transatlantic relations, Nordic cooperation and position in the international community. However, it is difficult to assess what this meant for Finland’s relations with the US and whether its activities were cost-efficient in terms of its partnership goals and national capacities.«²⁶

As early as 2009, a report by the Danish Institute of Internal Studies (DIIS) noted: »In the case of Afghanistan especially, many actors regard the comprehensive approach as a remedy for the lack of or incoherent strategies of various actors.« The study examines Danish civil-military cooperation efforts and outlines the various objectives as follows: from limited reconstruction projects facilitated by the military, to concerted planning and reconstruction and governance in the area of military deployment to allow the military to exit, to the view that the military provides a security umbrella so that the peacebuilding strategy can be implemented, to counterinsurgency-based stabilization strategies such as in Helmand.²⁷

LACK OF CLARITY AND REALISM

A clear, if often implicit, consensus has emerged that the overall package of secondary objectives – objectives like state-building that were meant to ensure that no further terrorist attacks would emanate from Afghanistan – was unrealistic, and that this flaw was insufficiently recognized

²³ The Norwegian Commission on Afghanistan (2016) *A Good Ally: Norway in Afghanistan 2001–2014*, both quotes on p. 12.

²⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (2023) *Between wish and reality. Evaluation of the Dutch contribution to Resolute Support*, p. 8.

²⁵ Finnish Institute of International Affairs (2023) *Finland in Afghanistan 2001–2021: From stabilization to advancing foreign and security policy relations*, pp. 14, 180.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁷ Finn Stepputat (2009) *Synthesis Report: Civil-Military Relations in International Operations – A Danish Perspective*. Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS Report 2009:16, p. 57.

in real time. In 2002, the regime change and the ouster of the Taliban did not resolve the many lingering rivalries in the country's politics. Karzai's interim administration, the constitutional Loya Jirga, and the first election did not magically confer unquestioned political legitimacy on the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, its president, and its government—a government rife with infighting and corruption, and hardly seen as dealing fairly with all its subjects.²⁸ Norway's commissioners concluded what many others echoed: »Interventions involving regime change, as in Afghanistan, drain resources and can foster even more conflict. Successful state-building during ongoing armed conflict is near impossible to achieve. International state-building efforts must be based on inclusive political solutions.«²⁹

The US strategy of eliminating not only al-Qaeda but also the Taliban and supporting selected non-Taliban actors in building a state that would prevent the use of Afghan soil for international terrorism was based on various assumptions, including that a sufficiently inclusive, legitimate, and effective political order was possible without the Taliban, with Hamid Karzai as the only element to ensure acceptance among the Pashtuns. The fundamental problem with this strategy was not generally identified as »mission creep« – the gradual expansion of objectives to the detriment of an original, meaningful goal—but rather that the mission itself, in its absolute, rigid form, was unrealistic and failed to adapt in time to the many warning signals.

The reports we reviewed leave open whether there were major missed opportunities. The paths not taken are left to future historians: Were the Taliban ready to participate in the 2001 Bonn Conference or in later steps toward the new Afghan state? Could the new state have achieved earlier, more effective territorial control and political legitimacy if its security forces had been built up more quickly and with a stronger focus on civilian protection and human security, and if neither the hunt for al-Qaeda and the Taliban nor the government had relied so heavily on warlords? Would an earlier, more serious effort at state-building or counterinsurgency (well before 2009) have made a strategic difference?

Most of these questions remain fundamentally unresolved, but there is ample evidence that major problems at the political-strategic and military-strategic levels (such as the complexity of the al-Qaeda-Taliban relationship³⁰ and the willingness of key elements of the Taliban to explore a political solution to the war, or the military counterproductiveness of trying to conquer various mountain valleys in eastern Afghanistan) took several years even for senior US and allied officials to understand and address.

Most of the reviews reviewed agree that a major factor that made it unrealistic to build »a self-sustaining, moderate and democratic Afghan government, ... able to exercise its authority and to operate throughout Afghanistan«³¹ (NATO's »desired end-state« as articulated in 2003) was the timeline. What SIGAR calls »20 one-year reconstruction efforts rather than one 20-year reconstruction effort«³² consistently sought to impose technocratic or Western domestic political expectations on Afghanistan's complicated political landscape. Even the common reference to »generational« timeframes, never implemented in actual policy, military strategy, or program planning, was never supported by contextual historical evidence.

The miraculous hope of speeding up the desired process, whether by simply spending more and more US dollars or by imposing technocratic solutions that ignored the underlying political conflicts, was not limited to American or Western policymakers. Many of the Afghan officials, politicians, and activists whose perspectives shaped the West's official understanding of events in the country, as they spoke to Western embassies, military commanders, NGOs, and academics, pushed in the same direction. These voices probably did not represent »all Afghans« or even »Afghan elites,« but they had the ear of the interveners, and many of them advocated accelerated modernization to make up for the lost decades of anti-Soviet insurgency and civil war.

A final major theme running through all the reviews we examined is the role of exit strategies or metrics for determining the end of intervention. It is striking how rarely any of the reviews conclude that some kind of hard exit strategy would have been beneficial. The Finnish review comes closest, blaming the lack of exit planning on the lack of multilaterally agreed metrics for withdrawal and thus the reliance on US politics when it came to the actual decision to make concessions to the Taliban in Doha.³³

In contrast, all of the reviews strongly emphasize that it was a generational challenge to establish a sustainable political settlement for Afghanistan, while the available systems of government planning, whether civilian or military, imposed a wholly unrealistic short-termism on any practical line of effort.³⁴

²⁸ Florian Weigand (2022) *Why did the Taliban Win (again) in Afghanistan?*, LSE Public Policy Review, 2(3): 5, pp. 1–10.

²⁹ *A Good Ally*, p. 14.

³⁰ For a good overview, see Rahmatullah Amiri and Ashley Jackson (2021) *Taliban narratives on Al Qaeda in Afghanistan*, ODI/Centre for the Study of Armed Groups.

³¹ NATO, *Longer-term strategy for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in its International Security Assistance Force role in Afghanistan*, UN Document S/2003/970.

³² US Special Inspector-General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2021), *What We Need To Learn: Lessons from 20 Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, p. viii.

³³ *Finland in Afghanistan*, p. 175.

³⁴ As two examples among many from the largest and smallest government actors, see US Special Inspector-General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2021) *What We Need To Learn: Lessons from 20 Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, pp. ii and 22–38, and *Finland in Afghanistan*, pp. 73 and 162.

3.2 KNOWLEDGE, CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING & LEARNING

Most reviews cite a failure to understand the political context of Afghanistan, including conflict dynamics, decision-making, and issues of legitimacy, as a major reason for ill-conceived activities and, ultimately, overall failure.

The lack or misinterpretation of knowledge and local understanding affected all areas of international intervention,³⁵ as many of the reviews acknowledge. The Norwegian review in particular illustrates the challenges within the military, especially in the early years of the intervention. It notes that »small units without local knowledge and without adequate language skills were deployed for short periods and repeatedly reassigned to new places.«³⁶ Turning to the US, the report notes that the country often conducted operations with little understanding of the dynamics on the ground.³⁷ Intelligence was also affected, especially at the beginning. The report notes: »Like most of the NATO intelligence community in 2001, the NIS had limited knowledge of Afghanistan.«³⁸ And while the development sector in Afghanistan emphasized the importance of »conflict sensitivity« and »local knowledge« in this sector as well, it too often failed to apply these principles in practice. For example, the Dutch review notes that »not enough attention was paid to conflict-sensitive programming and, more generally, to the unintended negative effects of development cooperation. While much attention was paid to the potential financial and reputational risks for the Netherlands, much less attention was paid to the negative side effects of the programs in recipient countries.«³⁹ Surprisingly, the role of local staff in knowledge production and retention is rarely discussed in the reviews. One of the few exceptions is the Finnish review, which notes with regard to institutional memory: »Locally hired employees could have a key role here, in addition to investing in information management systems and how to use them.«⁴⁰

The gap in understanding key features of Afghan politics and society is attributed to failures in knowledge production, sharing and retention on the one hand, and limited use of existing knowledge on the other. Knowledge can certainly mean very different things to different people. This is reflected in the reviews, as some engage with more substantive notions of knowledge, ranging from substantive academic studies of Afghanistan and its socio-political dynamics to more focused political economy and conflict analyses, while

others focus on more technical notions of knowledge, especially reporting, monitoring and evaluation. Failure certainly occurred at many levels, but the lack of essential forms of knowledge, such as an understanding of context, political economy, public perceptions, and conflict dynamics, particularly in rural areas, was particularly striking and impactful.

Despite the obstacles to data collection in a war zone, there are many examples of key knowledge that existed in 2001 but was not used by policymakers, or that was produced during the intervention only to be ignored, superseded by higher-level policy direction, or rendered obsolete by existing path dependencies. In essence, the available reviews summarily refute the argument that it was impossible to know the key pieces of analysis that led to the major policy failures.⁴¹

KNOWLEDGE IMPACT

There was certainly a lack of knowledge and understanding of Afghanistan, as many reviews conclude, particularly with regard to the dynamics and political economy of the country's rural areas. More importantly, given the sheer volume of reports produced on Afghanistan, the international intervention had limited interest in or capacity to process existing knowledge. This had a profound effect and contributed to the international failure in Afghanistan.

The foundation of the future Afghan state, with its extensive corruption and dependence on warlords, was already set in stone by the way the military intervention was conducted in 2001, empowering Northern Alliance and other commanders to take the fight to the Taliban and enabling them to capture the state and remain influential until 2021. The political and military focus on a »light footprint« approach did not take into account historical knowledge of political power and legitimacy in Afghanistan, such as that gained in the context of the civil war of the 1990s and the brief period of Taliban rule. Ultimately, according to SIGAR, »US officials often empowered power brokers who preyed on the population or diverted US assistance away from its intended recipients to enrich and empower themselves and their allies.«⁴²

In the years that followed, a great deal of research was done on Afghanistan. However, the personal understanding of the country by international staff often remained limited. This was largely due to the lack of personal interaction with Afghan society, with most international staff being

³⁵ See also Florian Weigand (2023) *Gescheitert, aber womit? Legitimität und Wissen in Afghanistan*, in Koloma Beck, Teresa and Kühn, Florian P. (eds.) *Zur Intervention: Afghanistan und die Folgen*, Hamburger Edition.

³⁶ *A Good Ally*, p. 82.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (2023) *Inconvenient Realities: An evaluation of Dutch contributions to stability, security and rule of law in fragile and conflict-affected contexts*, p. 38.

⁴⁰ *Finland in Afghanistan*, p. 193.

⁴¹ The findings on »knowledge« mirrors academic analysis, see e.g. Johnson, C. and Leslie, J. (2005) *Afghanistan – the mirage of peace*, London and New York: Zed Books; Dorronsoro, G. (2005) *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan: 1979 to the Present*, New York: Columbia University Press; Schetter, C. (ed.) *Local Politics in Afghanistan – A Century of Intervention in the Social Order*, London: Hurst and Company.

⁴² US Special Inspector-General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2021) *What We Need To Learn: Lessons from 20 Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*, p. xi.

»bunkerized«⁴³ and having limited interaction with the wider society, especially in more insecure and rural areas.⁴⁴ For example, the Finnish review notes: »Many Finns who worked in Afghanistan felt that they did not know the country's conditions, culture and especially its languages very well when they arrived in the country ... Those on assignment may have felt they had poor local knowledge even after their deployment in Afghanistan due to the limited mobility and security situation.«⁴⁵ In addition, much of the political analysis focused on the central level of government and key power brokers in major urban areas. While many studies have also been conducted in rural areas, they have often been guided by narrow questions about issues such as aid delivery, livelihoods, or agriculture, and have avoided in-depth analyses of political economy. Combined with limited capacity and interest in processing the research generated, rural dynamics in particular – including those related to the Taliban – and how they were shaped by international intervention often remained a mystery.

This lack of understanding translated into policy and willful belief. As SIGAR notes: »Lack of knowledge at the local level meant projects intended to mitigate conflict often exacerbated it, and even inadvertently funded insurgents.«⁴⁶ The Norwegian review concludes: »The belief that international actors with little knowledge of local power alliances or local political economy could win the people's trust on behalf of a central government that had next to no legitimacy among its people was misguided from the outset.«⁴⁷ Accordingly, the lack of local knowledge not only affected the war on terror, but also shaped the broader state-building mission of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). The Norwegian review concludes: »Together with inadequate knowledge of local politics and power struggles, the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) structure of ISAF served to undermine rather than to achieve the objective of building a centrally governed Afghan state.«⁴⁸ As a result, the Dutch review calls for more reflection on the impact of international interventions on local conflict dynamics and the broader political economy, mitigating negative impacts and incorporating the perspective of affected communities in »determining where the conflict sensitivity risks outweigh the expected benefits.«⁴⁹

While research and journalistic reports sounded the alarm early on,⁵⁰ ignorance of the political economy within the in-

tervention contributed to the delegitimization of the Afghan state, fueled the conflict, and led to international support for corruption. As SIGAR observes: »Access to the coalition was a key avenue, in many ways the avenue, for consolidating wealth and political power, so coalition officials often became kingmakers. Some of the coalition's key partners were the same unsavory individuals who had been previously swept out of power, to widespread applause, by the Taliban. These »winners« not only reaped economic benefits and ran the government for personal gain, but many also committed major crimes with impunity, including murder, creating a kind of mafia rule. ... By fueling corruption and the population's disillusionment with its government, the coalition undermined the very government it sought to legitimize and drove support for the insurgency.«⁵¹

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Considerable expertise on Afghanistan existed in Western countries in 2001 and was further developed during the intervention, especially in countries that devoted resources to research and expertise (e.g., the US Institute of Peace [USIP]). In many countries, however, existing expertise was not consistently taken into account in policymaking and implementation, and long-term investment in new expertise remained limited. For example, the Norwegian review points out that the traditional Norwegian approach is »close cooperation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norwegian NGOs and research institutes«⁵² – but that this approach was not followed.

SIGAR draws the lesson that »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.«⁵³ Meanwhile, the Finnish report notes: »Today's conflict and crisis contexts are multilevel and network-like. To understand them, we must take into account the international, regional, national and local levels, historically structured power relations, governance structures, local cultures, conflict dynamics and character of the involved actors.«⁵⁴

Similarly, the UK Stabilization Guide states: »If we do not understand who has power (formally and informally), who is in conflict with whom, cultural traditions, gender norms, historical sensitivities, local specificities, physical and geographic factors and much else, we are more likely to have unrealistic or false expectations about what will work. It means we are more likely to take actions that inadvertently cause harm and undermine our objectives.«⁵⁵ It recognizes what it calls »the

⁴³ Ruben Andersson & Florian Weigand (2015) *Intervention at Risk: The Vicious Cycle of Distance and Danger in Mali and Afghanistan*, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 9(4): 519–541; Florian Weigand & Ruben Andersson (2019) »The »bunker politics« of international aid in Afghanistan«, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 13(4): 503–523.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*; SIGAR (2018) *Stabilization: Lessons from the US Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, p. 171.

⁴⁵ *Finland in Afghanistan*, pp. 158–159.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *A Good Ally*, p. 219.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁴⁹ *Inconvenient Realities*, p. iv.

⁵⁰ See e.g. Sarah Chayes (2006) *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban*, Penguin.

⁵¹ SIGAR (2018) *Stabilization: Lessons from the US Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, p. 64.

⁵² *A Good Ally*, p. 159.

⁵³ SIGAR (2018) *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the US Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-16-58-LL, p. 84.

⁵⁴ *Finland in Afghanistan*, p. 169.

⁵⁵ Stabilisation Unit (2019) *The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation A guide for policy makers and practitioners*, p. 24.

intervention paradox: the point at which we first intervene is often the point when we have the most potential to affect change but it is also the point at which we have the least knowledge and understanding of the context and its political dynamics.«⁵⁶ Awareness of this paradox must not lead to »analysis paralysis,« according to the British lesson, but »we must invest consistently in improving our contextual understanding while admitting the limits to our knowledge and challenging our assumptions and we must adapt our activities as our understanding evolves.«⁵⁷

Conducting research and generating nuanced knowledge has certainly been difficult in Afghanistan, often constrained by security requirements that limited data collection to »secure areas.«⁵⁸ Much of the knowledge from such areas was produced by intelligence agencies – focused on security issues, with limited triangulation, quality control and transparency – rather than independent research. Crucially, much of the intelligence was focused on identifying insurgents and specific threats – rather than understanding the dynamics of the conflicts.⁵⁹ According to a US study of its intelligence activities in Afghanistan, »the United States has focused the overwhelming majority of collection efforts and analytical brainpower on insurgent groups, our intelligence apparatus still finds itself unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which we operate and the people we are trying to protect and persuade.«⁶⁰ Ultimately, the bigger-picture knowledge of Afghanistan and its defining narratives were dominated by the narratives of urban elites who were in close contact with the international community but often had limited insights into the rural areas themselves.

Ironically, many of the international reviews also chose – or simply could not – engage much with the affected communities. In particular, the Taliban take-over made research in Afghanistan challenging for those reviews conducted after August 2021. Besides SIGAR, for instance, the Norwegian review conducted research in Afghanistan. The expert panel traveled at least to Kabul and a local NGO assessed the long-term impact of Norwegian assistance in Faryab Province.

To improve knowledge production, research must be enabled and encouraged, including in rural and insecure areas, and must include those segments of society that are overheard or disagree. Reaching people who are difficult to reach – for example, because of geography, security, or gender dynamics – must be a priority in knowledge production.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 34.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.; SIGAR (2018) *Stabilization: Lessons from the US Experience in Afghanistan*, SIGAR-18-48-LL, p. 171.

⁵⁹ *A Good Ally*, p. 77.

⁶⁰ Michael T. Flynn, Matt Pottinger and Paul D. Batchelor (2010) *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan*, CNAS, p. 4; see also SIGAR (2021) *What we need to learn: Lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction*, SIGAR-21-46-LL, p. 71.

⁶¹ Philipp Rotmann and Abigail Watson (2023) *Close the Gap: How to Leverage Local Analysis for Stabilization and Peacebuilding*, Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi).

Meanwhile, knowledge production cannot be limited to intelligence and specialized analysis, but must contribute to a comprehensive understanding of power dynamics, political economy, society and public perceptions across levels and geographies. The history and past efforts to influence such dynamics, especially those that have failed, need to be understood. Ultimately, knowledge production must be an integral part of engagement in a conflict environment. How does it avoid becoming, as the Finnish report pointedly asks, »yet another bureaucratic exercise that gathers dust on a shelf somewhere«? How can it instead become an integral part of activities that go beyond preparation and are used »to build more equal dialogue and understanding between donors and recipients?«⁶²

KNOWLEDGE RETENTION & SHARING

It was not only the generation of knowledge that proved difficult and, on the whole, a failure. The translation of data and analysis into policy and the retention of new knowledge also remained limited.

A key factor and limitation in the Afghan context was staff capacity. Recruitment challenges often resulted in the hiring of staff with limited experience. While staff gained experience and knowledge over time, short assignments, staff rotation, and high staff turnover significantly reduced the retention of knowledge. Often, knowledge had to be generated repeatedly. The Dutch review concludes: »The capacity available at the embassy was a limiting factor that undermined the information position of the MFA. The effectiveness of its efforts to coordinate and influence policy in Kabul also depended heavily on the experience and quality of individual staff members. The complex and difficult working environment also made it hard to recruit experienced staff. As a result, many projects and programs were managed by relatively junior staff, often with little experience in conflict settings. The retention of knowledge and experience was further limited by the relatively high turnover of staff in Kabul.«⁶³ Similarly, the Norwegian review of its military concludes that »that lasted throughout the entire engagement period was the frequent personnel rotation.«⁶⁴ SIGAR in the United States extends the point far beyond Kabul or embassy staff: »short tours of duty for both military and civilian personnel undermined institutional memory and programmatic continuity in Afghanistan.«⁶⁵

A second failure was limited knowledge sharing. At the personal level, knowledge was shared informally in some cases. For example, the Norwegian review notes: »The informal transfer of knowledge between colleagues and contingents was ... most effective in small, tight-knit units such as the

⁶² FIA (2023) *Finland in Afghanistan 2001–2021: From Stabilization to advancing foreign and security policy relations*, pp. 171–172.

⁶³ *Inconvenient Realities*, pp. 21–22.

⁶⁴ *A Good Ally*, p. 132.

⁶⁵ SIGAR (2021) *What we need to learn: Lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan reconstruction*, SIGAR-21-46-LL, p. 53.

Intelligence Service and special forces.«⁶⁶ Beyond such informal knowledge transfer, however, many organizations lacked institutionalized mechanisms for knowledge sharing to maintain knowledge regardless of personnel rotations and turnover. Looking at the military, the Norwegians point out that the »armed forces have a poorly developed system for managing and generating this kind of complex, situation-dependent knowledge.«⁶⁷

Already failing at the operational level, knowledge sharing across departments is even more challenging, especially when working with external partners. For example, the Dutch review concludes: »Short contracts, rest and recreation (R&R) and staff rotation limited the capacity and retention of knowledge at embassies. As a result, the MFA was often relatively dependent on unverified information provided by the implementing partners themselves.«⁶⁸

In addition, knowledge was lost as it moved up the hierarchy, with a prevailing optimism bias, including in the context of monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Negative reports were often withheld and relied on more positive information, resulting in a dilution of analysis at different levels of the hierarchy. The Finnish report, quoting a respondent, finds: »Reporting good results was important, which undermined the veracity of the reporting. In the words of one of the respondents, »pervasive dishonesty about the situation, which was conveyed to the homeland,« was one of the intervention's key challenges.«⁶⁹ Dishonest reporting in all sectors, including crisis management and development aid, was also driven by an internal logic that required positive reporting to ensure future funding.⁷⁰ Similarly, the UK's Chilcot Inquiry into Iraq states: »Over-optimistic assessments lead to bad decisions,« criticizing that »the bearers of bad tidings were not heard.«⁷¹ As the report points out: »On several occasions, decision-makers visiting Iraq (including the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Chief of the General Staff) found the situation on the ground to be much worse than had been reported to them.«⁷²

Ultimately, the lack of knowledge and expertise did not only lead to operational challenges, such as conflict-insensitive programming or reliance on implementing partners. It also made it more difficult to look at the bigger picture, to think critically about objectives and to develop appropriate strategies. As the Dutch show: »A critical reflection on objectives and results was also complicated by limitations in the information and monitoring position and a general lack of capacity at the embassies.«⁷³

In order to improve knowledge and transfer, the Norwegian review recommends that »overlap between personnel posted abroad will save time in the long run and facilitate and improve the quality of their work,« noting that this is »especially important in conflict areas.«⁷⁴ An even more comprehensive approach to such challenges has been taken by the UK government. The United Kingdom established the so-called Stabilisation Unit, a cross-government unit jointly controlled by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Ministry of Defence (MOD), consisting of a London-based team and individual stabilisation advisers in selected embassies. Following the merger of the FCO and DFID and the creation of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Stabilisation Unit was replaced by the Office for Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation (OCSM). Crucially, however, the transfer of knowledge must also become more honest – this requires a culture that encourages critical thinking and the reporting of failures. Career incentives must be designed to feed into a more transparent and honest bureaucratic culture.

3.3 (IL)LEGITIMATE GOVERNMENT, STATE-BUILDING AND COUNTER-INSURGENCY

The construction of a legitimate state is often cited as one of the key goals of international intervention in Afghanistan. However, the complex construct of legitimacy and the question of whose views and values should be taken into account and matter most for a legitimate state were not much discussed in 2001 and its aftermath. Crucially, the Afghan state needed external legitimacy, legitimacy in the eyes of the interveners, not just legitimacy vis-à-vis the various domestic audiences. The mix of audiences was reflected in the constitution, which on paper covered a range of issues important to different audiences, including democracy, tradition, Islam, nationalism, and human rights.⁷⁵

While some European countries strongly believed in and prioritized the goal of state-building in Afghanistan, in the United States it was seen more as a tool for the goal of the war on terror. In practice, in the context of a US-dominated intervention, the priority of the war on terror was clear. It was reflected in the strong focus on counterterrorism, the exclusion of the Taliban from the political process between 2001 and 2009, the widespread corruption that enabled the buying of support and the building of alliances, and the focus on building a functioning Afghan army rather than a functioning police force—a set of practices that undermined the goal of inclusive state-building. As some of the studies point out, however, it remains unclear whether state-building is even possible during active warfare.

⁶⁶ *A Good Ally*, p. 64.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁶⁸ *Inconvenient Realities*, p. 37.

⁶⁹ *Finland in Afghanistan*, p. 135.

⁷⁰ *Finland in Afghanistan*, p. 189.

⁷¹ UK Iraq Inquiry (2016) *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry: Executive Summary*, para 863, p. 135.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Inconvenient Realities*, p. 37.

⁷⁴ *A Good Ally*, p. 226.

⁷⁵ Florian Weigand (2022) *Waiting for Dignity: Legitimacy & Authority in Afghanistan*, Columbia University Press.

REGIME CHANGE, STATE-BUILDING AND INCLUSIVE POLITICAL DEALS

Interventions involving regime change, as the case was in Afghanistan, drain resources and can foster even more conflict. They create expectations of economic and political reconstruction that are difficult to fulfill. Even contributions that, seen in isolation, are well founded may have unexpected, unintended or undesirable consequences. State-building is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve during ongoing armed conflict. International state-building efforts must be based on inclusive political solutions. External actors can do very little to give local authorities legitimacy among their own people.⁷⁶

The two findings in the quote above—that state-building is nearly impossible in war, and that state-building requires inclusive political solutions—are inextricably linked. It was the deep divisions among Afghanistan’s power brokers, the lingering mistrust among key population groups—not surprising so soon after the long and bloody civil war that preceded the 2001–2021 period—and the failure to unite them behind a new government that left the country with massive conflicts.⁷⁷ How to satisfy the demands of the victorious northern warlords while establishing an effective monopoly on the use of force to protect the population from their predatory violence? Was it more urgent to build an inclusive new political order (which would have required disarming and marginalizing the warlords), or to protect against the remnants of a Taliban that enjoyed considerable legitimacy among parts of the Afghan population?

None of the reviews offers a prescription for how inclusiveness might have been achieved. It is certainly always easier to judge after the fact what inclusiveness should have looked like, or when and if it was achievable.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, pressing questions remain. Was it necessary to intervene in Afghanistan when the Taliban offered to hand over Bin Laden to a third country in October 2001?⁷⁹ Was it possible to avoid regime change and work with the Taliban government to defeat al-Qaeda, given that the US famously rejected the Taliban’s offer to surrender in November 2001?⁸⁰ The historical record is now clear that overtures were made, but not given enough time or support by the George W. Bush administration in the US to have a chance of succeeding – but it is also not clear, despite early positive signals, how far the Taliban government would have been willing to cooperate with the United States.⁸¹

⁷⁶ *A Good Ally*, p. 224.

⁷⁷ For an early account, see Astri Suhrke, Kristian Berg Harpviken and Arne Strand (2002) *After Bonn: Conflictual Peace Building*. Third World Quarterly 23:5, pp. 875–891.

⁷⁸ See Steve Brookings (2022) *Why was a negotiated peace always out of reach in Afghanistan? Opportunities and Obstacles, 2001–2021*, USIP Peaceworks No. 184.

⁷⁹ ABC News (2001) *US Rejects New Taliban Offer*, 15 October 2001.

⁸⁰ Washington Post (2001) *Pentagon Briefing with Secretary Rumsfeld*, 19 November 2001.

⁸¹ *The American War*, pp. 55–59.

Were the wrong people invited to the Bonn Conference after the fall of the Taliban? Was it a strategic mistake to exclude the Taliban and to work with the warlords, allowing them to wield the power of international actors – especially the United States – for their own parochial interests and personal power, as the Finnish Institute for International Affairs, among others, argues?⁸² How much power did the intervention have to reshape Afghan politics and include all groups previously marginalized in bloody power struggles, as a Dutch evaluation asks?⁸³ Small countries might emphasize their comparative strengths in areas such as mediation as part of the solution, as the Norwegian Royal Commission did. But conflict mediation depends on the willingness of the parties to compromise. Whether it would have led to a massively more inclusive basis for post-Emirate state building remains a counterfactual.

For the main international actor, the United States, it was the choice of regime change in the service of a US national interest to root out »international terrorists« that required state-building, for how else could »future terrorists« be denied a safe haven in Afghanistan? How else could the United States and its allies justify the destruction of a government if not by helping Afghans rebuild it better? Former US diplomat Laurel Miller argued: »It would have been the height of irresponsibility to wipe away the existing regime in Afghanistan and make little effort to support the construction of a reasonably functional state in its wake.«⁸⁴

On the US side, the consensus expert assessment today is that in the early days of late 2001 and early 2002, the administration had been »assuming away the complexities of regime change,« as Laurel Miller testified before Congress. »The central idea, in other words, was that the United States could invade, wipe the political slate clean, move on, and somehow the situation would sort itself out without considerable US effort, which was to turn to military involvement elsewhere in the world. This idea was a theory with no empirical support.«

This approach made US policy »dependent on Afghan government success« – the success of state-building as well as the success of the actual government in place. This, in turn, deprived the US and its allies of effective influence over their Afghan partners: failure was not an option, no matter how ineffective and illegitimate the new Afghan government, and for many of the political and economic »winners« of the post-Bonn political order in Afghanistan, access to international resources was all but guaranteed or depended entirely on metrics (such as identifying or combating alleged terrorists) that did not contribute to – and often undermined – the establishment of an effective, widely accepted government.

⁸² *Finland in Afghanistan*, p. 39.

⁸³ *Inconvenient Realities*, p. ii.

⁸⁴ Laurel Miller (2021) *Afghanistan 2001–2021: US Policy Lessons Learned*, Testimony before the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, November 17; similarly Crocker at the same hearing, cited above.

SIGAR concludes that »the US 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.«⁸⁵ In doing so, they benefited greatly from a coalition-backed government whose corruption and lack of inclusiveness drove some rural elites and populations into the arms of the insurgency.⁸⁶

LEGITIMACY OF A CENTRALIZED AND CORRUPT STATE

Many reviews also highlight the other side of the »inclusive political solutions« coin: the Afghan Republic's failures at inclusive governance. »The Afghan government's high level of centralization, endemic corruption, and struggle to attain legitimacy were long-term contributors to its eventual collapse,« concluded SIGAR's study on why the Afghan government collapsed in 2021.⁸⁷ Despite these challenges, support for »government and civil society« averaged 49 percent of total Official Development Assistance (ODA) between 2008 and 2002, while spending on humanitarian aid and rural development remained low at 6.1 and 10.2 percent, respectively. A Dutch government report on *Impact of Aid in Highly Fragile States* thus concludes that Afghanistan has been treated as a »normal« developing country (as opposed to South Sudan, for example), despite the continued lack of progress in state capacity and good governance.⁸⁸ In its »Inconvenient realities« report, the Evaluation Department of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs concludes that the effectiveness of good governance, decentralization and anti-corruption programs tends to be low overall, despite some successes in technical, non-political activities at the subnational level.⁸⁹ Meanwhile, the reviews lack substantive engagement with the concept of »legitimacy,« what it is, and how it can be achieved in the Afghan context, relying on assumptions about what can underpin or undermine legitimacy.⁹⁰

Overall, the reviews agree that little will be achieved in the area of decentralization without political support from the central government. SIGAR identified the fundamental problem in how the 2001 Bonn Conference and subsequent constitutional process had »centralized power in the Afghan presidency. By investing so much power in the executive, Afghanistan's political system raised the stakes for political competition and reignited long-running tensions between an urban elite eager to modernize and conservative rural populations distrustful of central governance.«⁹¹ Afghan-

istan's history has been marked by tensions between the central government and local and regional political forces and armed groups. Efforts to centralize have always met with resistance in the provinces, especially when the central government is weak.⁹² So what is the right way forward in the longstanding debate about the right balance between central and local power? The reviews do not provide clear answers, but a USIP study points to some possibilities, such as the need to combine decentralization with power sharing at the center to reduce »winner takes it all« outcomes, taking into account the wishes of local populations, empowering local councils and dispute resolution, paying attention to revenue and budget authorities, experimenting, and avoiding rigid sequencing.⁹³ None of these are risk-free strategies, and a clear understanding of the power relationships between different actors at the local, provincial and national levels is essential.

Moreover, each Afghan election was less credible than the last,⁹⁴ its legitimizing effect diminishing as the insurgency challenged the state, »culminating in a final election for which voter turnout was estimated at only 10 percent. In contrast, the Taliban had a simple rallying message that the government could not claim: They were fighting the foreign occupiers, they were less corrupt than the government, and their legitimacy was grounded in religion. Endemic corruption, including persistent electoral fraud and predatory behavior by government officials, fundamentally undermined the Afghan state.«⁹⁵

These were not just problems of the Afghan government; they were problems to which ISAF partners had actively contributed. According to SIGAR's detailed investigations, the United States failed to reduce corruption in part because it »contributed to the growth of corruption by injecting tens of billions of dollars into the Afghan economy, using flawed oversight and contracting practices, and partnering with malign powerbrokers,« »in part because fighting corruption required the cooperation of Afghan elites whose power relied on the very structures that anti-corruption efforts sought to dismantle.«⁹⁶ It also failed to help the Afghan government build popular legitimacy, either through elections marred by massive fraud or through service delivery, as many ordinary Afghans found key services such as effective security or justice lacking or actively threatened by the government and its domestic and foreign allies, while attributing other services

⁸⁵ *What We Need To Learn*, p. 16.

⁸⁶ *America's War; Waiting for Dignity*.

⁸⁷ US Special Inspector-General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2002) *Why the Afghan Government Collapsed*, p. 69.

⁸⁸ IOB (2021) *Impact of Aid in Highly Fragile States: A synthesis of three systematic reviews of aid to Afghanistan, Mali and South Sudan, 2008–2021*, p. 118.

⁸⁹ *Inconvenient Realities*, p. 28.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ US Special Inspector-General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2002) *Why the Afghan Government Collapsed*, p. ii.

⁹² *Finland in Afghanistan*, p. 37.

⁹³ Their, A. (2020) *The nature of the Afghan state: Centralization vs. Decentralization*, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), pp. 5 ff.

⁹⁴ See Thomas H. Johnson (2018) *The myth of Afghan electoral democracy: the irregularities of the 2014 presidential election*, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29 (5–6): 1006–1039; Thomas Johnson (2019) *The 2019 Afghan Presidential Election: An Assessment of Problematic Processes and Results*, *Afghanistan* 4(1).

⁹⁵ See also Ashley Jackson & Florian Weigand (2019) *The Taliban's War for Legitimacy in Afghanistan*, *Current History* 118 (807): 143–148

⁹⁶ US Special Inspector-General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2016) *Corruption in Conflict*. p. i; US Special Inspector-General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (2002) *Why the Afghan Government Collapsed*, p. ii.

more to foreign aid or the Taliban (who allowed aid projects that benefited them) than to the government.

FIGHTING INSURGENCY

People respond in accordance to how you relate to them. If you approach them on the basis of violence, that's how they'll react. But if you say, »We want peace, we want stability,« we can then do a lot of things that will contribute towards the progress of our society.⁹⁷

The principles of counterinsurgency (COIN), the political-military attempt to defeat violent insurgency and (re-) establish state rule, were rediscovered far too late in the Afghan war. They were rediscovered not by political analysts or planners, but only by military officers and experts, and as a result of painful military setbacks.⁹⁸ It is therefore a tragic irony that its principles were rediscovered and partially implemented (far too late, when much had already been lost politically) mostly by military actors, even as, in the words of a US Inter-agency Counterinsurgency Guide, insurgency and counterinsurgency is »primarily a political struggle, in which both sides use armed force to create space for their political, economic and influence activities to be effective.«⁹⁹

Modern democratic counterinsurgency theory proposes that insurgency be understood as a political competition for popular legitimacy, fought only partly by force. Success in counterinsurgency then requires a »good« local government that is accepted by all major population groups and provides fair governance—something the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan never became in its two decades of its existence. In support of such a good government, foreign counterinsurgents could help train and equip and protect the population from the insurgents, rather than becoming another threat to their lives (through inadequate intelligence triangulation leading to poor targeting) and livelihoods (through poppy eradication without economic alternatives).

Many of these military aspects of counterinsurgency were mishandled by the US and other allies in Afghanistan, or mishandled initially and attempted to correct them far too late, after the combat mission's withdrawal date had already been set. The primacy of the hunt for al-Qaeda and the Taliban led the US to empower warlords, fuel corruption, and undermine the state-building project for at least the first seven years, a crucial period that the short-lived »surge« (2009–2012) could not reverse.¹⁰⁰

Western military counterinsurgency doctrine and manuals, however, contain many important lessons that are relevant

when the political conditions for inclusive, fair government are in place. British military stabilization doctrine is a prime example. It now devotes most of its chapters to political issues and repeatedly uses examples from Afghanistan to emphasize how military success depends on political factors: »In Afghanistan, a lack of accountability within some military supply chains led to the armed forces' resources being redirected to the insurgents and directly strengthening those opposing the NATO International Security Assistance Force forces. Such instances will likely lengthen the duration of a campaign and cost more lives. Consequently, countering corruption should be an essential component of planning at all levels for the military contribution to stabilization.«¹⁰¹

Based on a superior political offer by the local partner government to members of all (!) relevant population groups, the security side of counterinsurgency requires the police, military, and intelligence functions of the state to effectively be superior protectors of the people, compared to the insurgency. To use the British government's jargon, this means to »protect the political actors, the political system and the population« as the first of their »3Ps of stabilization« (the other two being to promote political processes and to prepare for a longer-term recovery).¹⁰² This means not becoming a threat to local populations in order to kill or capture insurgents, but rather sharing significant risks in order to provide effective protection – i.e., subordinating a traditional military logic to the political struggle for legitimacy, which is »the core of COIN,« as the latest applicable US military doctrine consistently emphasizes.¹⁰³ Military contributions are explicitly presented as subordinate to political efforts (»primacy of politics«).¹⁰⁴

For the central part of the counterinsurgency effort that has been played by training, advising, mentoring, and partnering with Afghan forces, the Dutch evaluation of NATO's *Resolute Support* mission captures several key findings that are echoed by the few other reviews that explicitly touch on the military realm: it »often does not work in fragile states where basic conditions such as security, ownership, and political capacity are not in place«, »deployments of six months are too short«, and the need to avoid »overly positive reporting.«¹⁰⁵ Ultimately, however, none of the reviews we examined made a comprehensive assessment of military counterinsurgency; »the question of whether or not COIN can be used by external actors as part of a successful exit strategy remains unresolved,«¹⁰⁶ as a Danish study concludes with reference to the lack of political conditions on the part of the Afghan government and the international community's relationship with it.

⁹⁷ Nelson Mandela, as quoted in: UK Ministry of Defence (2022) *Shaping a Stable World: The Military Contribution*, Joint Doctrine Publication 05, Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, p. 32.

⁹⁸ *Learning under fire*, pp. 31–33.

⁹⁹ US Government Inter-agency Counterinsurgency Initiative (2009) *US Government Counterinsurgency Guide*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ Romain Malejacq (2019) *Warlord Survival: The Delusion of State Building in Afghanistan*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press.

¹⁰¹ *Shaping a Stable World*, p. 110.

¹⁰² *Shaping a Stable World*, p. 22.

¹⁰³ US Joint Force Development (2021) *Joint Publication 3–24 Counterinsurgency*, p. xiv.

¹⁰⁴ *Joint Publication 3–24 Counterinsurgency*, pp. III-5, III-10.

¹⁰⁵ *Between wish and reality*, pp. 55–56.

¹⁰⁶ Louise Riis Andersen (2016) *International Lessons from Integrated Approaches in Afghanistan*, Danish Institute for International Studies, p. 34.

LOCAL OWNERSHIP AND CAPACITY BUILDING

The voice within the Afghan government calling for more Afghan leadership and Afghan ownership basically says: hand us the money please, we will sit through your endless meetings, we will pretend to co-draft documents, we will agree with the objectives, and we will join the pretense that we are in charge, as long as somehow you hand us the money. And that is how a lot of the work is done. The concept of Afghan leadership and Afghan ownership is vigorously pushed by international actors, but in practice it tends to involve an »Afghan face« and token responsibilities while holding on to the important political and financial decisions.¹⁰⁷

The lack of local ownership is a central theme in many reviews of engagement in Afghanistan. But not all: the SIGAR reports avoid the term »local ownership« and use the term »capacity building,« which can be seen as a statement in itself. However, while it is easy to point to the lack of both local ownership and capacity, it is harder to describe what is meant and how it can be achieved. As the quote above illustrates, local ownership was always proclaimed by international actors, but often resembled a performance rather than a sense of genuine partnership, making it an ambiguous concept, to say the least. A key lesson from Afghanistan is that the interests of many local actors were not taken into account, while others were listened to without sufficient questioning, especially the range of empowered warlords. Three important questions remain:

(1) *Who owns?* Which local actors in a heterogeneous and sometimes divided society like Afghanistan are we talking about? Only those Afghans who represent the state or those who have the power to organize violence? How do we reconcile the fact that there is no one local owner, but rather a plethora of actors with different agendas (as is to be expected in any society)?

(2) *How do we maintain oversight?* Achieving local ownership means relinquishing some control by those supporting local actors. How do partners and donors honestly balance this with the need to monitor where and how their taxpayers' money is being spent?

(3) *Do we need trust and shared values?* How can this work if both sides do not trust each other? How do proclaimed ownership and divergent values clash?

The report »Finland in Afghanistan« offers reflections on the need for local ownership and the potential problems associated with it.¹⁰⁸ It emphasizes that »local ownership took the form of participation and responsibility for implementation, rather than of control over goals, processes, or courses of

action.« It also points to the close link between ownership and capacity building and questions whether partners really share common goals. It also argues that the understanding of »local ownership« has been too narrow, focusing on those with power within the state apparatus and selecting those Afghans with whom a given country has worked most closely because they can be trusted or cannot be bypassed. It therefore recommends that greater local ownership be accompanied by a more critical examination of rhetoric and actions. Last but not least, there is no such thing as a single »local actor« and »local ownership becomes problematic from the point of view of Finland's foreign policy value base if it means empowering an elite which violates the local population's human rights.«¹⁰⁹

The Dutch review process led by the IOB (which examined engagements in Afghanistan, but also Mali and South Sudan) highlights the link between low capacity and a process of localization and is therefore worth quoting at length:

Nevertheless, there are still many challenges in putting localization into practice. The most notable challenge has been the chain of implementation; the ministry often worked through UN agencies and international NGOs because of their capacity to handle large funds, their ability to implement activities at scale, and their compliance with reporting and auditing requirements. These organizations generally subcontract the implementation of actual project activities to national or local organizations, which affects the extent to which local organizations and the communities and beneficiaries can have a say in project objectives and approaches. However, true delegation of responsibilities to the local level did not occur regularly due to the limited risk appetite of the MFA, which resulted in strict reporting and auditing requirements for implementing organizations. The transfer of risk to international implementing partners created a disincentive for them to delegate responsibility and control to their local partners. Our field research revealed that many national organizations that were partners in larger consortia were still not actively involved in designing and managing the projects and were often not considered as equal partners. A similar pattern also emerged in the relationship between national NGOs and their local counterparts (civil society organizations/CSOs) or the local population. According to many local CSOs, there was little transparency about the design, timeframes and budgets of the broader program that they were contracted to implement.¹¹⁰

Technical approaches to capacity building do not fit well with a system that creates political stability through appointments and patronage structures. Thus, internationally standardized merit-based assumptions for appointments and performance, driven by the desire to build a technocratic government that fights mismanagement, have often been doomed to failure,

¹⁰⁷ Martine van Bijlert (2010) *London Conference (1): Calling for Afghan ownership and Afghan leadership*, Afghanistan Analysts Network.

¹⁰⁸ *Finland in Afghanistan*, pp. 172ff

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174

¹¹⁰ *Inconvenient Realities*, pp. 37f

ignoring the fact that a merit-based system has its limits in all contexts.

Low capacity and lack of trust easily lead to parallel structures. In fact, a study by an independent consultant commissioned by the EU Parliament actively calls for them in these circumstances: »The EU should not shy away from creating strong parallel development structures to governments that cannot reach beyond their immediate urban setting. This is mainly the case when the government is considered corrupt and lacking in legitimacy and would allow the EU to build resilience into its development assistance.«¹¹¹

In hindsight, it is striking how much funding has gone to supporting the government and building its capacity, as the IOB report on the impact of aid in highly fragile states notes for Afghanistan:

*Notably, the share of aid for »government and civil society« averaged an annual 49 percent of total ODA between 2008 and 2020, and its share was still 49 percent in 2019. At the same time, funding of humanitarian aid and rural development remained low at 6.1 percent and 10.2 percent, respectively, of total ODA for the period 2008–2020. These numbers suggest that donors continued to treat Afghanistan as a »normal« developing country (unlike South Sudan, where spending for »government and society« shrunk to 6 percent; see below), despite the lack of progress in sectors such as state capacity and good governance.*¹¹²

SIGAR highlights the failure to build capacity, stating that US agencies have failed to invest equally in building the capacity of the Afghan government to eventually assume responsibility for these functions and end its reliance on donor funding and oversight. The IOB, in its meta-evaluation of the impact of aid in fragile contexts (Afghanistan, South Sudan and Mali), states that interventions to promote good governance or capacity are not effective, except for pockets of success, highlighting that capacity can be built when it is more technical, apolitical and at the subnational level. The more ambitious, complex and large-scale the capacity-building program, the more likely it is to fail.¹¹³

Questions about capacity building should also lead to deeper reflection on training and mentoring efforts by partner states and missions (such as the EU or UN). Modern crisis management aims to reform local governance and security sectors through training and capacity building.¹¹⁴ But are we taking the right approaches? The Dutch review of their RSM engagement highlights the lack of specific objectives for international advisors and their Afghan counterparts, and insufficient guidance and monitoring of progress by NATO.

There were too few contacts, too little motivation on the part of the Afghan counterparts, and too short a deployment period to be effective.¹¹⁵

INTERNATIONAL AID GEARED TOWARDS THE STATE

Some of the findings of the various reviews focus more specifically on the delivery of international assistance in Afghanistan. Aside from the challenge of dishonest reporting (see Knowledge section), a key problem that the reviews highlight with regard to development assistance is a severe lack of long-term thinking, a failure to recognize that the stated goal of state-building in Afghanistan is a challenge that will take generations. Even in the 20 years of post-2001 aid, plans and funding commitments have changed constantly. Drawing on SIGAR findings, the Dutch report notes that »analysts have criticized the US for underestimating the time and resources needed to rebuild Afghanistan, leading to short term fixes and effectively 20 one-year strategies for Afghanistan, rather than one 20-year effort.«¹¹⁶ According to the Dutch review, the lack of long-term planning, exacerbated by staff turnover, led to the hiring of expensive external consultants and experts.

A controversial and widely debated issue in development assistance is whether to fund governments (»on budget«) and enable them to better serve their people, or to provide assistance more directly to the people through specific projects (»off budget«). Different actors have drawn competing lessons from their experience of providing development assistance in Afghanistan. On the one hand, the Dutch review notes that many donors, unable to rely much on the government, also created unsustainable parallel structures that made it difficult to withdraw without risking collapse. The review points out that the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), a multi-donor trust fund for non-security budget support administered by the World Bank, has facilitated donor coordination and harmonization of aid. On the other hand, the European Parliament's review comes to the opposite conclusion, stating that the »EU should not shy away from creating strong parallel development structures to governments that cannot reach beyond their immediate urban setting. This is mainly the case when the government is considered corrupt and lacking in legitimacy and would allow the EU to build resilience into its development assistance.«¹¹⁷

Meanwhile, the Norwegians – early supporters of the ARTF – find that the fund makes it difficult to assess the impact of Norwegian aid, concluding that »Norwegian authorities themselves should have had better capacity to follow up

¹¹¹ Hassan, O. (2023) *Afghanistan: Lessons learnt from 20 years of supporting democracy, development and security*, Study requested by the European Parliament AFET Committee, p. 33.

¹¹² IOB (2002) *Impact of Aid in Highly Fragile States*, p. 18

¹¹³ IOB (2022) *Impact of Aid in Highly Fragile States*, pp. 46f

¹¹⁴ *Finland in Afghanistan*, p. 173

¹¹⁵ IOB (2023) *Between Wish and Reality: Dutch Contribution to Resolute Support Mission*, p. 3

¹¹⁶ IOB (2023) *Inconvenient Realities*, p. 46 referencing SIGAR, »*Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*«, p. viii.

¹¹⁷ Oz Hassan (2023) *Afghanistan: Lessons learnt from 20 years of supporting democracy, development and security*, European Parliament, Study requested by the AFET Committee, PE 702.579, p. 33.

the aid funding in multi-donor funds or have put greater emphasis on joint control.«¹¹⁸ More generally, both political and economic monitoring of aid spending in Afghanistan has been limited in many contexts. As the Dutch review notes: »Evaluations of programs supported by the MFA have rarely assessed whether they were economically efficient or timely,« while also having a »relatively limited capacity to adequately monitor implementation and proactively steer adaptive programming.«¹¹⁹

While many donors certainly underestimated the time and resources needed for Afghanistan,¹²⁰ it was a lack of funding per se that created the challenges for development assistance in the country. More importantly, the way aid budgets were politically determined contributed to the failure. As the Norwegians observe: »The volume of aid in Afghanistan was set primarily on the basis of political priorities, not on the needs in the field.«¹²¹ In particular, in the Norwegian context, it was a political decision to spend as much on development assistance in Afghanistan as on the military. Therefore, the review concludes: »A high volume of aid is not in and of itself a good objective, and particularly not when the objective is to balance the civilian and military efforts.«¹²² Based on this conclusion, the review makes the following proposal: »The quality and impact of Norwegian development aid, as well as the administrative capacity available, must be given greater weight than is currently the case. Experience from Afghanistan demonstrates that a large volume of aid should not be an end in itself.«¹²³

Finally, and not surprisingly, several reports illustrate the lack of coordination across levels (discussed in more detail in the next section), driven by donors seeking political visibility and pursuing their own national priorities. Legitimate concerns about corruption in the Afghan state further empowered donors to fund various projects directly rather than through or in close coordination with the government. For example, the Norwegians observe: »Inadequate coordination between the donor countries and Afghan authorities, weak formal Afghan institutions and the need of donor countries to increase their political visibility led to the fragmentation of international development aid early on.«¹²⁴ Driven primarily by political concerns, especially the domestically valued visibility of funded projects, this fragmentation was certainly not due to a lack of coordination meetings, which took up a lot of time, especially for donor representatives in Kabul. Nevertheless, according to the Norwegians: »Coordination in Afghanistan took place at many levels, from more or less spontaneous donor groups in Kabul to large-scale, formal coordination groups and donor conferences. The Afghan authorities were formally in charge of the coordination activities. In reality this proved difficult, particularly as much

of the aid was channeled outside of the Afghan national budget.«¹²⁵

3.4 NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COORDINATION

Each review had to reckon with the problem of coordination, both at the national level between different ministries, agencies and professional cultures of diplomacy, development, defense, policing and others, and at the multinational level. The reviews we have examined identify a wide range of problems under the admittedly vague label of coordination. In most cases, these are not primarily failures of coordination within a given distribution of roles, resources and power – they are the structural divisions that have made it difficult, and often impossible, for well-meaning, committed individuals to integrate their work across major organizational boundaries in a way that maximizes their collective contribution to shared strategic goals.

LACK OF NATIONAL STRATEGIC INTEGRATION

As the first of its seven topline lessons, SIGAR in the United States identified a core failure of effective strategic leadership based on the institutional mismatch between the key bureaucratic parts of the American intervention toolbox: the State Department was supposed to lead, but lacked the expertise to manage complicated strategic endeavors, the resources to fund them, and the trust of Congress to manage such resources. So the Department of Defense took over, because it had the resources, the confidence of Congress, and the experience to conduct strategic campaigns, but it lacked the governance and economic expertise and could not fill the gap. The overall analysis deserves a longer quote (our emphasis).

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 US 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 inter-agency 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*

¹¹⁸ *A Good Ally*, p. 98.

¹¹⁹ *Inconvenient Realities*, p. 44.

¹²⁰ *Inconvenient Realities*.

¹²¹ *A Good Ally*, p. 98.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹²⁵ *A Good Ally*, p. 87.

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.‹ For example, according to one senior US 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.‹ ...

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. ... 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. ... State's 7,900 foreign service officers—the backbone of the agency—only slightly outnumber the musicians employed in DOD bands.

Imbalances like these have broad implications for the respective abilities of DOD and State to respond to emergencies. ... 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. However, US policymakers had no other viable option but to lean on the military and simply pretend State holds the reins in such missions.¹²⁶

While the outsized role of the defense bureaucracy and the military is unique to the United States, other reviews agreed in identifying the fundamental problem that no single actor was empowered and able to provide strategic leadership for at least a single national contribution to the Afghanistan mission. These problems were not new to the US – which had already tried to improve matters by creating a Special Coordinator for Stabilization and Reconstruction in 2004, only to be stymied by a lack of funding and authority – or to other allies.

In its massive inquiry into the invasion of Iraq, Britain's Chilcot Commission concluded about the post-invasion period: ›Foreseeable risks included post-conflict political disintegration and extremist violence in Iraq, the inadequacy of US plans, the UK's inability to exert significant influence on US planning and, in the absence of UN authorisation for the administration and reconstruction of post-conflict Iraq, the reluctance of potential international partners to contribute to the post-conflict effort. The Government, which lacked both clear Ministerial oversight of post-conflict strategy, planning and preparation, and effective co-ordination between government departments, failed to analyse or manage those risks adequately.‹¹²⁷ It goes on to say about reconstruction in particular: ›The Government never resolved how reconstruc-

tion would support broader UK objectives. ... At key points, DFID should have considered strategic questions about the scale, focus and purpose of the UK's reconstruction effort in Iraq. Many of the failures which affected pre-invasion planning and preparation persisted throughout the post-conflict period. They included poor inter-departmental co-ordination, inadequate civilian military co-operation and a failure to use resources coherently.‹¹²⁸

The Dutch evaluation of Resolute Support (2015–2021) made the same point. ›Although the Dutch contribution to Resolute Support in Afghanistan was not an integrated Dutch mission, there was still an explicit aim to integrate defence efforts with development and diplomacy. However, the inter-complementarity of development and diplomacy with defence efforts proved hard to put into practice. While some [Foreign Ministry] policy staff were positive about the extent to which an integrated approach existed, the majority did not consider the ›3 Ds‹ as truly integrated and mutually reinforcing in practice. Indeed, there was no joint analysis or programming by defence, diplomacy and development actors.‹¹²⁹

OPERATIONAL COOPERATION AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

At the operational level, in terms of the day-to-day exchange of information between ministerial staff in the capitals, in Kabul and in the Afghan provinces, many reviews paint an almost equally bleak picture of limited day-to-day practical cooperation between different actors – in stark contrast to the widely held view that ›locally, collaboration worked.‹

As the Norwegian Royal Commission concluded, ›there was little coordination between the civilian personnel in Faryab and the Norwegian Embassy in Kabul, although this improved over time.‹¹³⁰ This appears to have been an unintentional effect of a conscious policy choice. ›In contrast to many other allies, the Norwegian authorities stressed that this [civil-military] coordination would be based upon a clear separation of military and civilian tasks. The civil-military separation or the so called ›Norwegian model‹ was to entail coordination but not intermingling of development aid and military engagement. What this meant in practice was unclear to many of the personnel stationed within the PRT.‹¹³¹

As for the latter part of the Dutch involvement in Afghanistan, the country's recent assessment is equally bleak. ›While there were a few instances where it was possible to align development with defence activities – e.g. by including Mazar-i-Sharif in the area of operation of the demining programme – for the most part, there was no clear connection other than that defence staff and diplomats kept each other informed about their work. Resolute Support was a

¹²⁶ *What We Need To Learn*, pp. 10–11.

¹²⁷ UK Iraq Inquiry (2016) *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry: Executive Summary*, para. 814.

¹²⁸ *idem*, para. 817.

¹²⁹ *Between Wish and Reality*, p. 42.

¹³⁰ *A Good Ally*, p. 125.

¹³¹ *A Good Ally*, p. 127.

mission in its own right, and the military contribution could therefore not easily be aligned with development objectives. Development objectives, on the other hand, involved long-term commitments that could not easily be aligned with the military contribution. Diplomatic efforts were primarily aimed at supporting both development and military objectives.«¹³²

INSTITUTIONAL PRESCRIPTIONS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

In the Netherlands, »[the] evaluation found that the government's ambitions to coordinate the various elements of its foreign policy interventions with each other lag behind in practice. The Dutch government should be more explicit about the objectives and operationalisation of the integrated approach and invest more in joint problem analysis to ensure the coherence of foreign interventions by different ministries.« It identified its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (which had commissioned the evaluation, and already includes the trade and development portfolios) as the center for such improved coordination. »The MFA and implementing partners must make a greater effort to operationalise the ›triple nexus‹ between development, peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance. For both the integrated approach and the triple nexus, the MFA should strengthen its efforts to promote coherence and coordination with the wider international community.«¹³³

In the United States, SIGAR's conclusion is similar to the prevailing, if politically weak, consensus in the foreign policy community. Based on the analysis that Washington's problem was not confusion about the overarching goal (no more terrorist attacks on the US from Afghan soil) or even important subordinate goals such as state-building, the breakdown was identified at the level of linking goals to actions and harmonizing different strands of the latter. Intermediate goals, such as the defeat of the Taliban, that Karzai would single-handedly control the northern warlords and create a fair government for the Pashtuns, or that an effective Afghan security force could be built with very little initial money, training, or risk-sharing, were not challenged as unrealistic. The ways in which different parts of the US government worked at cross-purposes, such as working with warlords, eradicating the poppy, or conducting counterterrorism operations based on weak intelligence that only strengthened the appeal of the Taliban insurgency, were not resolved.

Dealing with these kinds of problems proved beyond the capacity of even the Obama administration's vastly expanded National Security Council. SIGAR found that its existence and authority alone did not make it fit for the purpose of orchestrating a complicated, protracted intervention. »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. ... ›There was just no process to do post-war mission planning.‹ 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.‹«¹³⁴

It was up to the Departments of State and Defense to choose the means to achieve the ends at the right scale, to find the necessary funds and the expertise, and to put it all together in practice. Without a culture of strategic planning and programming, without money, and without some of the necessary expertise, the State Department, like the Defense Department, was unable to provide the necessary leadership. To do better, the US would need a State Department with the resources, culture, and expertise to exercise the leadership role it was theoretically given. This is the logic (though so far largely unfunded) behind the Global Fragility Act's mandate for the State Department to coordinate future preventive engagement in priority conflict areas.

The Norwegian Royal Commission found a different problem and concluded that a single coordinating body was needed. »Norwegian authorities must take steps to improve coordination mechanisms. A high-level coordination unit with responsibility for developing strategies and action plans should be established, and must be approved at the political level. The activities of the coordination unit must have a greater strategic focus than was the case under the State Secretary Committee for Afghanistan. The unit must engage in dialogue with relevant partners.«¹³⁵

The UK is probably one of the allies that has made the earliest and most serious attempts to apply these lessons to the institutional set-up of government. It first created a cross-departmental Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit (PCRU) in 2004, which became operational in 2005 and was renamed the Stabilisation Unit (SU) in 2007. While the SU focused on how to actually »stabilise« a war-torn country, get the right staff in place, and manage the key funding pots to get things done in Afghanistan (and, to a much lesser extent, Iraq), the creation of a National Security Council by David Cameron's coalition government in 2010 provided what the Chilcot Inquiry found to be »an improved framework for constructing an integrated civilian-military approach to post-conflict strategy, planning, preparation and implementation.«¹³⁶

Barely related to Afghanistan itself in its genesis, the UK's National Security Council (NSC) is largely a product of Whitehall's reckoning with the domestic counterterrorism problem in the years following the 2005 London bombings and a cross-party reaction to Tony Blair's freewheeling decision-

¹³² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (2023) *Inconvenient Realities: An evaluation of Dutch contributions to stability, security and rule of law in fragile and conflict-affected contexts*, p. 42.

¹³³ *Inconvenient Realities*, p. iv.

¹³⁴ *What We Need To Learn*, p. 10.

¹³⁵ *A Good Ally*, pp. 224–225.

¹³⁶ UK Iraq Inquiry (2016), *The Report of the Iraq Inquiry, Section 10.4: Conclusions on Reconstruction*, para. 146.

making style over Iraq. While Gordon Brown had already set up a system of security committees, which he tried to chair himself but never paid serious attention to, Cameron used the National Security Council (NSC) to manage the Afghanistan war and other key national security challenges directly on a weekly basis (as Blair had done), and to do so using and directing the formal machinery of government (quite unlike Blair).¹³⁷

INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS AND COORDINATION EXAMINED THROUGH A NATIONAL LENS

The intervention in Afghanistan was, at least at its outset and in its continuing rhetoric, profoundly multilateral and international in nature. NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) consisted of 43 nations (including both NATO and non-NATO members); the UN Afghanistan Country Team included up to 28 UN agencies, funds and programs; the UN Special Political Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) included up to 20 field offices; the EU Delegation in Kabul played a central coordinating role; and the European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL Afghanistan) operated from 2007 to 2016. Last but not least, both the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank had huge portfolios in Afghanistan over twenty years of engagement. So there was no lack of appetite to engage jointly or through contributions to international organizations and funds.

However, when it comes to assessing failure and success, many countries look at their engagement through a national lens, analyzing their international partnerships from a national perspective. While some nationally based review processes address these international commitments and cooperation in depth, others do not. And while the World Bank and ADB have published public evaluations, the review processes of NATO, the EU, and the UN have been largely internal. Some national review processes have built on the experiences of others, inviting experts from other countries or organizing joint conferences of reviewers. Overall, however, there is room for improvement in the practice of mutual learning.

A central theme in evaluations, especially those of smaller contributing nations, is the dominance of the United States, especially within NATO. As the Dutch IOB report *Inconvenient Realities* points out, »other countries had a much bigger role and stronger influence, with the US being the most dominant player. In the last few years of their presence, the US increasingly went its own course without involving other donors. A case in point was the unilateral decision to agree to a withdrawal of troops without informing either the Afghan government or NATO partners.«¹³⁸ Dependence on the United States is a theme echoed in the Norwegian and Finnish reviews.

As a result, Norway's 2016 report recommends a more specialized approach rather than engaging in complex and integrated activities: »Norway should not assume responsibility for integrated activities (state-building, development and security) on a large scale. Norway should instead be developing specialized expertise in areas where long-term needs are identified and clear roles are stipulated, within the framework of broader international, unified efforts.«¹³⁹ This implies a more independent Norwegian approach, while at the same time seeking to influence international policy frameworks to a large extent.¹⁴⁰

Similarly, for Finland, a key lesson from its involvement in Afghanistan is to actively participate in international networks based on its own goals and interests. As one diplomat put it: »If we are going to take part in these things, we have to use our voices.« This means less going along with others and more exerting influence in areas where its investments are significant. An example from Finland's perspective was its influence within EUPOL Afghanistan (which, however, played a rather limited role in the context of the overall dynamics), where it contributed significantly but did not use this contribution to influence policy. In general, the report stresses that the EU could have played a more active role through its well-resourced delegation, especially when the US focus was elsewhere.¹⁴¹

However, the assumption that smaller contributing states could use their influence to shape the outcomes of missions such as EUPOL Afghanistan may be unlikely or even wishful thinking. Researchers have emphasized that the EU's police mission in Afghanistan »had hardly any impact on transforming the ANP into an effective police force« for reasons often beyond the control of individual contributing countries, such as an Afghan police force in absolute disarray when the EU mission began in 2007, a general problem of understaffing and lack of support from EU member states, the slowness of EU bureaucracy, and strong reservations on the part of the United States, which later decided to undertake the same activities with more money and capacity.¹⁴²

The IOB report *Between Wish and Reality* on the Dutch involvement in RSM points to the need to question the objectives of an overall mission such as Resolute Support much earlier. To do this, assessment frameworks will need to include stronger passages on feasibility and risk, both for the overall mission and for individual contributions. Doing more of the analysis in-house, rather than relying on larger partners or organizations, is also a conclusion drawn by FIIA. However, as the Finnish report also notes, aid can be more easily channeled and monitored through smaller bilateral projects. The impact of larger, complex and joint projects

¹³⁹ *A Good Ally*, p. 15

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 223

¹⁴¹ *Finland in Afghanistan*, pp. 184ff

¹⁴² UK Parliament (2011) *European Union Eighth Report: The EU's police mission in Afghanistan*, Appendix 3: MEMORANDUM BY DR RONJA KEMPIN, HEAD OF EU EXTERNAL RELATIONS, GERMAN INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AND SECURITY AFFAIRS (SWP), BERLIN

¹³⁷ Joe Devanny, Josh Harris (2014) *The National Security Council: National security at the centre of government*, Institute for Government.

¹³⁸ IOB (2023) *Inconvenient Realities*, p. 21

is much harder to measure and remains dependent on the interests and diligence of other actors.¹⁴³ The question from a national perspective is therefore how to maintain realistic control over one's own contribution within a multilateral engagement and how to define where it is more important to work together on a larger scale, even at the cost of less control and influence.

Looking at where international cooperation takes place, it is mostly in the active phases, but less so in terms of joint understanding and review. As a 2016 DIIS report points out: »The inter-agency cooperation forums cannot make do with focusing on joint planning and decision-making, but must also make room for joint learning and analysis.«¹⁴⁴ In addition, the report outlines that the surplus of goals, the lack of international strategic leadership (beyond US dominance), and the fact that activities were based on existing logics of very different bureaucratic systems and structures led to a minimal approach of not getting in each other's way:

Although at the rhetorical level there was a focus on coherence understood as integration, in practice there were much less ambitious activities, which at the most were intended for coordination and cooperation, and sometimes just on deconflicting the activities, so that one agency did not, for example, unintentionally equip the same militias that had just been demobilized by another agency.¹⁴⁵

As a consequence, as the FIIA review concludes:

Another lesson international actors can learn from Afghanistan is that without a coherent and long-term strategy, taking realistic and comprehensive action is not possible. One of the most recurrent criticisms of international intervention in our data is the lack of shared goal setting and strategy that take the context into account Instead of following a long-term and comprehensive strategy, extensive international spending was guided by national and actor-specific interests.¹⁴⁶

In sum, while coordination and cooperation have worked at the level of information sharing, strategic coordination, »i.e., clarifying and coordinating the objectives and plans of various international actors with regard to Afghanistan«¹⁴⁷ remains an area for improvement.

¹⁴³ Ibid, p. 188

¹⁴⁴ Andersen, L.R. (2016) *Afghanistan Lessons Identified 2001–2014 Part 1 – International Lessons from Integrated Approaches in Afghanistan*, DIIS, p. 81

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 83

¹⁴⁶ *Finland in Afghanistan*, p. 174f

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 176

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CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the most fundamental lessons from the reviews we examined is the warning we have used as the title of this report: »Never say never,« as former US diplomat Laurel Miller quotes the 1983 James Bond movie, is a stark counterpoint to the common reading that the era of massive interventions is over and that most of the challenges the US and its partners, such as Germany, faced in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 are irrelevant for the future.

This would be a dangerous conclusion, especially if it is used to deprioritize the need to identify and learn the lessons of those twenty years. In addition to the moral obligation to the war's casualties and victims to at least learn from the costly policy mistakes that were made, there are two other reasons to urgently implement the lessons learned.

The historical reason is that we have seen the same story over and over again. For one complicated reason or another, some government will find itself back in some kind of complex state-building or counterinsurgency project – just like the US did in the Western Balkans in the 1990s and in Afghanistan in 2001, after having successfully wiped the experience of Vietnam from its institutional memory.¹⁴⁸

Until that happens, there is a second reason: In Ukraine, Syria, coastal West Africa, and elsewhere, regional and global partners are using exactly the same bureaucracies, budgets, and administrative systems, and only slightly adapted strategies and conceptual templates, to do many of the things that were key parts of the intervention in Afghanistan. Some learning has already taken place, but most of the toughest nuts have not been cracked, and the results remain mixed. So there is an urgent need to learn those lessons in order to improve what is being done *right now*.

With this in mind, we follow the logic of our chapters above to present 13 recommendations based on the reviews examined. The sum of the reviews conducted in other countries and international organizations helps to identify the principles of what is needed to avoid repeating the mistakes made in Afghanistan. What others took away for their own countries cannot provide the precise institutional shape of how these principles will best be implemented in another country with its specific system of governance and strategic culture. What we offer in these final pages, therefore, is a set of such principles, to be taken as benchmarks to be achieved through context-specific changes in the institutional tools for foreign policy making in any given country.

GOALS & STRATEGIES

The main goals of the intervention in Afghanistan were, in retrospect, unrealistic. Only at the highest level is this obviously not true: in the United States government, through four presidents of both parties, a single overarching strategic goal has been clearly and consistently pursued – to prevent another 9/11, another large-scale terrorist attack on US soil. Given that no such attack has occurred as of late 2023, this top-level US goal must be considered realistic. However, the ongoing activities of groups like the Islamic State and the continued presence of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan add nuance to such thinking.

At the next level of objectives, however, the charge of lack of realism must be accepted: »A self-sustaining, moderate and democratic Afghan government, in line with the relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions, able to exercise its authority and to operate throughout Afghanistan«¹⁴⁹ – NATO's »desired end-state« as articulated in 2003 – was not achievable, at least not with the strategy pursued, and the main obstacles were known from the start.

At this level, operational objectives and their hierarchy were far from clear within and between allied governments and key international organizations. UN Security Council Resolution 1386 (2001), which mandated ISAF, supports »international efforts to root out terrorism« while »wel-

¹⁴⁸ Philipp Rotmann, David Tohn and Jaron Wharton (2009) *Learning Under Fire: Progress and Dissent in the US Military*, *Survival* 51:4, 31–48: The British learned, after bloody failures, at least some of the principles of successful counterinsurgency in the Malayan emergency (1950–52), and promptly forgot about them, only to be badly surprised in Northern Ireland and in Iraq. The US military learned some of the same lessons in Vietnam, and took away »to never again engage in a prolonged war against irregular forces« (p. 34). Both failed, of course, to avoid a repeat of history, and painfully grappled with rediscovering old lessons and retooling their strategies in the bloody years of 2004–2007 in Iraq and 2007–2012 in Afghanistan.

¹⁴⁹ NATO, *Longer-term strategy for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in its International Security Assistance Force role in Afghanistan*, UN Document S/2003/970.

coming developments in Afghanistan that will allow for all Afghans to enjoy inalienable rights and freedom unfettered by oppression and terror.« Was state-building a means to the end of the war on terror, was the war on terror a means to the end of state-building, or were both goals equally important? Among the smaller allies, not everyone was as honest as the Norwegian Royal Commission, which reported clear successes in its government's overriding political goal: to be a »good ally« to the United States, as it titled its report.

While unavoidable in the language of negotiation, the same confusion prevailed at the level of strategy: how best to pursue the counterterrorism mission in the face of the sometimes conflicting interests of local allies; the extent to which the Taliban were irrevocably tied to al-Qaeda and what it would take to defeat them; whether it was necessary and, if so, how (and on what timetable) to build a state that would govern not only the cities but also the Afghan countryside; how much emphasis to place on democracy and human rights. Different parts of the US government, different allies, and their own agencies set different priorities, often clearly intended to counter or complement what another was doing. Some of this complementarity reflected a healthy division of labor, but much of it was a toxic symptom of the failure to resolve the most critical tensions at the heart of the supposedly joint endeavor.

Debates about »mission creep« were a symptom of this confusion and the failure to resolve these strategic differences. Another common feature of many debates and reports, however, did not stand up to scrutiny: We were struck by the fact that only one of the many reviews we examined called for never launching another intervention without a preconceived exit strategy.

In the many countries that supported the intervention, political institutions, bureaucracies, and the media failed to effectively scrutinize the assumptions behind the superficially plausible statements of strategy and the ugly and sometimes counterproductive implementation that was not immediately obvious but still quite visible, as innumerable journalistic and research reports show.

From this analysis, one key recommendation emerges to avoid a repeat in the future:

1. Ensure a regular, critical, and thorough examination of strategic assumptions to allow for strategic review and adjustment. This must take place in several concentric circles: within the executive bureaucracy, with full access to classified information and assessments; between the other branches of government (primarily parliaments, but courts and independent auditors can also play a role); and on the part of the media, academia, and the public at large (where it worked best in Afghanistan, only to be largely ignored in policymaking).

Each country and each organization will allocate the parts of this responsibility differently, but they must be distributed in an overlapping and mutually reinforcing

way that counteracts the pressure to run with unrealistic and unclear goals. Governments and parliaments need to find their own ways, appropriate to their specific constitutional arrangements and political culture, to have regular, critical and thorough internal discussions about whether their big-picture goals and how they expect to achieve them are (still) realistic.

This is a very different challenge from information sharing and coordination at the working level between departments, ministries or agencies, each of which has to focus on its specific mission rather than the big picture. Instead, governments and parliaments should be asking: Who are the Afghans with whom we are trying to build a modern state? Who do they represent, how much power do they have, what do they want? What are their chances of winning the political competition, and at what cost? Such questions need to be asked not only for high-level political projects, such as the 2008–2012 period in Afghanistan, but at much earlier stages, such as the countries of coastal West Africa for Germany, the US, or the UK today.

KNOWLEDGE

In the course of the international intervention, extensive research on Afghanistan has been produced. However, the political economy of rural areas in particular remains poorly understood. Crucially, policymakers failed to make sufficient use of the knowledge we had. Short staff rotations, fear and restrictive security risk management, and catastrophic knowledge management made knowledge production, retention, and sharing even more difficult.

Several recommendations emerged to improve knowledge production and retention:

2. Ensure a minimum level of depth and diversity of comprehensive knowledge about current affairs, particularly the politics, economics, and society in historical perspective of each relevant country, both within government (the diplomatic and intelligence spheres) and in the public domain (the research sphere). Knowledge production must go beyond specialized intelligence collection and analysis and contribute to a comprehensive understanding of a context. The hard questions about the political economy of power, violence and control, and about public perceptions far beyond the easily accessible bubbles of urban English-speaking elites, need to be asked and the answers challenged. This requires research, including in rural and insecure areas, as well as deep linguistic and cultural understanding. Reaching people who are difficult to reach – for example, because of geography, security, or gender dynamics – must be a priority in knowledge production.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ See e.g. Philipp Rotmann and Abigail Watson, *Close the Gap: How to Leverage Local Analysis for Stabilization and Peacebuilding*, GPPI 2023.

3. Within government bureaucracies, cadres of country experts with skills, knowledge and relationships need to be created to facilitate the accumulation of knowledge over the years and to address the challenges of knowledge transfer. In addition, knowledge transfer needs to be institutionalized to ensure as much continuity as possible in the context of R&R and high staff turnover. Crucially, the transfer of knowledge, especially to superiors, must become more honest – this requires a culture that encourages critical thinking and the reporting of mistakes. Career incentives must be designed to feed into a more transparent and honest bureaucratic culture.
4. Governments' efforts and their impact need to be better monitored at frequent intervals, not just where it is easy and safe to do so. Massive differences in local public perceptions, corruption, expectations of the state, etc., between urban and rural areas, different population groups, etc., need to be understood and captured in near real time to counteract the tendency – again observed in many reviews – to over-report successes and under-report challenges. Honest reporting and reflection on failures could be productive.¹⁵¹ Meanwhile, alternative scenarios of how key strategic assumptions might play out need to be explored. Actors at various levels need to be encouraged and empowered to ask these questions and to be heard – within government, in terms of a more robust and challenging discussion of analysis and strategic assumptions; in parliaments, in holding governments to account; and in the media, in providing public accountability.
5. Parliaments cannot rely on governments and public debate alone; they will at least have to get better at using the two. Only one or two professors willing and able to engage with government and the public on a difficult current affairs challenge in their country of expertise have often proved too easy to ignore or sideline in a political system under intense pressure to »do something,« so public funding of policy-relevant research will need to ensure sufficient breadth and depth of expertise for governments, parliaments and the media to draw on when needed.

(IL)LEGITIMATE GOVERNMENT

Drawing conclusions and recommendations for building a state apparatus from existing reviews of the engagement in Afghanistan is a difficult exercise. The international partners have made many serious and consequential mistakes. Combine this with a fragmented and war-torn state with weak institutions, characterized by a lack of capacity, corrupted and instrumentalized by powerful elite networks, and you have a recipe for failure. This may lead one to conclude, as the IOB reviews did, that the only change possible is small-scale, based on local practices and institutions.

But it is more complicated than that. First, the state is not a single actor, but an enormously complex network of institutions and actors who do not share the same goals – this is true of any state, but especially of a state being built in a time of war. Second, for many years discussions of state-building suffered from a certain narcissism that exaggerated the power of external actors. That time seems to have passed, but while the new realm of humility is there in words and speeches, it has not fully reached the institutional mechanisms of the partner and donor machinery that provides military support and aid.

The key points to take away are therefore:

6. A new or reformed state can only take root if it is accepted by all relevant groups whose territory and activities the state is expected to govern: this is the basic requirement for an inclusive political settlement. Ultimately, building a legitimate state requires that all people feel that they are treated with dignity and respect in their daily interactions with the authorities.¹⁵²
7. The idea of »local ownership« does not work in the singular, but only in the plural – all the more so in a heterogeneous and at times divided society like Afghanistan. There are many different »local owners« to consider, divided horizontally by a range of criteria such as geography, gender, tradition and education, age, and vertically by differences in power, resulting in different values and interests. As in any society, but especially in a war-torn one, not all people share a common vision of who should govern their country and for what purposes. Listening to them is necessary, but not sufficient. The key is to identify and support a coalition of local owners who are willing and able to build the kind of sustainable peaceful order we seek to support, and to find ways to engage those other local owners who oppose that change without unnecessarily creating new enemies.
8. If the goal is to protect a peaceful majority from a violent insurgent minority, a military counterinsurgency operation can succeed only if the political precondition is in place: an inclusive state that serves all its citizens fairly, especially those the insurgents claim to represent and the security forces they ask to fight for them (see above). When this is the case (which it was not in Afghanistan), the military part of externally supported counterinsurgency requires effectively protecting the local population and building the capacity of local security forces to do so – both tasks that involve significant risks for the external »assistant« and require a significant commitment to understanding the local context and building effective relationships, well beyond the usual six- to nine-month rotational deployments common to most military contributors to ISAF.

¹⁵¹ See e.g. the »*Failure Reports*« by Engineers Without Borders in Canada.

¹⁵² *Waiting for Dignity*.

9. Technical capacity building in a highly politicized environment does not solve political problems and often fails (or even makes things worse). This is because construction or training is not independent of politics, but is or becomes part of it. Technical responses must therefore be embedded in a nuanced understanding of the political context and dynamics in order to be successful. Achieving political goals through technical assistance can therefore only work if certain criteria are met. First, local allies must have an explicit and promising strategy for achieving the desired political change. Second, technical improvement must be a sufficient condition for success. Finally, it must be realistic to build the necessary level of capacity (taking into account the risk of staff attrition) within the timeframe required to achieve the desired political change. If the most important political challenges are too big for this approach, start small and build slowly from the bottom up.
10. Accordingly, international aid spending must follow long-term strategies, avoiding short-term funding cycles and shifting priorities. While aid spending can be managed in a technocratic manner, the political dynamics need to be understood and taken into account. The political implications of different funding strategies (e.g. on-budget and off-budget) in a given context, and the political implications of successes (e.g. education) and challenges (e.g. corruption) need to be understood and regularly reviewed. Aid spending needs to be driven by local needs and coordinated with other donors, rather than dominated by domestic priorities.

COORDINATION

The first conclusion to be drawn from the many findings on coordination is that much of it is not about coordination at all: When the failure to »coordinate« is presented as the cause of either conflicting objectives (e.g. between counter-terrorism and the rule of law) or simply bad strategies (as the counterterrorism mission has at times been pursued in a counterproductive manner), the problem is not one of coordination. In some cases, flawed assumptions and bad strategies were simply not recognized and effectively addressed in time for the reasons examined in the previous sections, and better coordination would not have solved these parts of the problem.

At the same time, there were real gaps in coordination with real consequences for the failure in Afghanistan. To take the most consequential case of the United States, no part of the bureaucracy was empowered and capable of leading such a complex intervention. The National Security Council was limited in its resources and role to formulate policy and strategy at the highest level, but was unable to direct implementation and monitor the critical linkages between the various parts of this mission, where assumptions about strategic choices and Afghan politics would have been exposed as flawed. The State Department lacked experience in setting and implementing strategic plans, the trust of Congress, and effective systems for spending money on a large scale, as the

contracting scandals for police training in Iraq showed in the early years of the Afghanistan intervention. The Pentagon and the intelligence community took over by default, bolstered by almost unlimited Congressional and public trust, but relying on limited political and contextual understanding. Other governments have faced similar challenges, sometimes with different roles and distributions of power.

The common refrain of the reviews is a call for integrating the mandate, expertise, and capacity for effective leadership across several large-scale bureaucratic instruments with their own diverse strengths and cultural idiosyncrasies. In the United States, with its powerful NSC, this is seen mainly as a matter of re-empowering the State Department (which is already part of the Global Fragility Act). In most other countries, it has become part of the call to establish an effective leadership and coordination cell directly linked to the prime ministerial level in terms of ultimate executive responsibility.

11. Governments need a central strategic coordination unit for multi-sectoral international efforts, especially those where the overall strategy requires ministries or agencies to do things differently or to do things other than their previous core business. Where and how such a unit is best established depends on the constitutional, political and institutional context, which is different in each country. However, it must have sufficient internal influence to ensure that each individual contribution across government bureaucracies promotes the common strategy to the maximum extent possible. By directing and monitoring these contributions, such a unit must also identify gaps, analyze their causes, and develop timely strategic adjustments.

Joint international intervention in a complex conflict means that frank exchanges must be deepened when the going gets tough. There is ample room for improvement in learning together in and from complex multilateral efforts, not only at the strategic and implementation levels, but also in terms of joint analysis and joint review. In a crisis context, donor coordination and embassy exchanges are present and informative. However, when tensions and conflicts arise, actors too often settle for deconfliction, i.e. to avoid getting in each other's way. What is needed, however, is a deeper strategic discussion and questioning of strategic decisions and actions at various levels – and the lessons learned by smaller partners to assert their positions more forcefully hopefully point in this direction.

Moreover, learning from Afghanistan in international organizations has largely been an internal affair. There has been little appetite on the part of contributing countries for more public scrutiny of joint NATO, EU, or UN missions. The structures of these organizations are large, which means that reviews are a bureaucratic and usually highly politicized exercise, with headquarters far removed from the realities on the ground. Some might therefore say that internal review processes are a blessing in disguise, since a more public review might weaken the position of the international organization in question.

However, if international organizations are to work with their national counterparts with the same level of transparency, they should not be afraid to discuss publicly how they learn from mistakes.

12. Deeper international cooperation that goes beyond rhetoric requires more structured and strategic joint analysis and review, as well as open discussions and mechanisms to address conflicts at the policy and implementation levels. This goes beyond joint pledging and information sharing at headquarters conferences, donor conferences, or donor/embassy coordination meetings in a given conflict context. Efforts to jointly analyze contexts and learn from mistakes must be strongly linked to joint strategy development and implementation. Joint missions, funds and operations need to include greater consideration of feasibility and risk, both for the overall mission and for the individual contributions of partner countries. An understanding of the international environment must also go beyond traditional partners and donors to include neighboring countries and non-Western powers.

The final recommendation we would like to make is in the area of knowledge, but relates specifically to learning from the comprehensive review process. Given that so much effort has gone into identifying lessons learned from the international engagement in Afghanistan, we know very little about the impact of these exercises. So:

13. Follow up on lessons identified so that they become lessons learned and lessons implemented. Design and implement lightweight structures for systematic follow-up, for example by organizing hearings with implementing ministries, civil society, and academia one year and five years after the publication of the reports. Learn from and in partnership with other countries and organizations.

This study has highlighted that existing reports and studies offer a wealth of knowledge on which to build. The key is to apply that knowledge. If there is one thing that Afghanistan has taught the international community, it is that many of the lessons learned were clear within a few years of the start of the intervention. For some, especially those who worked in Afghanistan before 2001, they were obvious as soon as jeeps (soon to be armored) began to fill Kabul's congested streets. But there was little or no appetite to address them, as notions of success were more important to domestic audiences.

In early 2024, there is a lower level of ambition and a degree of humility based on an understanding that one's actions have a limited power to change the dynamics in highly complex contexts, at least in the way one intended. However, this humility need not lead to a retreat from such complexity, but to a more analytical, reflective, and adaptive approach to fragile environments.

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