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Failure to Launch: Evaluating the Costs and Benefits of America's Strategy for Building Afghanistan's Air Force

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Failure to Launch: Evaluating the Costs and Benefits of America's Strategy for Building
Afghanistan's Air Force

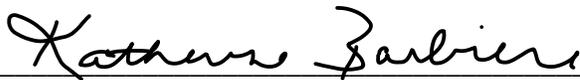
By

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Table of Contents

Thesis Summary	2
Introduction and Thesis Statement	2
History of the Afghan Air Force	4
Before U.S. Intervention	4
The U.S. Gets Involved	6
Current State of the AAF	7
Path Dependency	9
Country Comparison	11
Iraq	11
Costs	12
Financial Investment	13
Casualties	14
Public Opinion	15
Training	16
Contractors	18
Benefits	19
Regional Security	20
Less Strain on U.S. Military	21
Alternatives	21
Maintain the Status Quo	22
Withdrawal of all U.S. Troops	22
Increased Coalition Support	23
Follow the Soviets	24
Conclusion	26
Acknowledgments	27
Works Cited	30

Thesis Summary

The United States has been at war in Afghanistan for twenty years. For eighteen of these years, it has spent precious time, money, and resources to modernize the Afghan Air Force (AAF). In my thesis, I conduct a cost-benefit analysis of this strategy to determine whether the net benefits and the overall outcome of the program justify the level of U.S. investment. I compare U.S. efforts with the AAF to those with the Iraqi Air Force while exploring the idea of path dependency. My analysis reveals that U.S. efforts to modernize the AAF have been a failure. The United States has expended considerable costs but has not achieved its goal. The AAF has made some progress, but it still is unable to function as a fully, self-sustaining air force capable of performing its mission for the Afghan military. My recommendation is that the United States acknowledge the path dependency regarding the AAF and end their support.

Introduction and Thesis Statement

On March 2, 1933, the renowned British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, said that "Not to have an adequate air force in the present state of the world is to compromise the foundations of national freedom and independence" (Gilbert, 1991). Although these comments were made almost ninety years ago, they still ring true today and are echoed by many modern nations. The importance of air power in war has increased over time as technologies develop and new capabilities are discovered. First used in 1911 by Italy, aviation in combat has become a crucial component of modern warfare (MacIsaac, 2016). Since World War II, the United States has assembled and maintained the largest air force in the world, with a staggering total of 5,369 aircraft in operation (Deptula et al., 2019). The U.S. Air Force (USAF) became a separate branch

of the military in 1947 and has participated in military operations in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and now Afghanistan. In addition, the United States has assisted other countries in building their air forces. In this paper, I examine the case of U.S. support for the Afghan Air Force (AAF).

For the last twenty years, the United States has been at war in Afghanistan and embroiled in conflicts throughout the Middle East and South Asia. The longevity of these wars demonstrates the difficulty in resolving security challenges throughout the world. U.S. policy has been to offer military assistance and other forms of support to combat these challenges. However, there have been no easy solutions. In Afghanistan, the American goal to train and build security forces that would enable Afghanistan to secure itself when the United States left has been of limited success.

According to the DOD Casualty Status report, 2,314 American service members and civilian contractors have been killed since the start of the war (U.S. Dept of Defense, 2021). Although this number and the duration of the war have received a lot of attention in the American press, the efforts to rebuild the AAF have not. The AAF has been a vastly understudied topic compared to the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Police forces. U.S. investment in the AAF is important not only because of the crucial role the AAF plays in the fight against the Taliban but also because the mission's success or failure could have serious consequences for how the United States approaches future attempts to rebuild or modernize partner nation air forces.

My thesis explores U.S. policy in Afghanistan in relation to efforts to build an independent air force. I will use cost-benefit analysis (CBA) as my primary tool to examine the overall U.S. strategy in modernizing the AAF. To do so, I rely upon news articles, government reports, and personal interviews to evaluate the pertinent costs and benefits of U.S. policy while

also comparing U.S. practices in Afghanistan to those in Iraq. Finally, I will propose possible alternatives strategies and recommend the best course of action.

History of the Afghan Air Force

Before U.S. Intervention

Almost every nation in the modern world has an air force. Airpower is used for a variety of mission sets such as moving troops and supplies, gathering intelligence, and destroying enemy targets. Airpower has proven highly capable in multiple conflicts and continues to evolve as technology progresses. Although some air forces have been around much longer than others, they all play an integral part in their respective country's national security strategy.

Afghanistan can trace its air force back to the early 20th century. Initially formed in 1924, the Royal Afghan Air Force mainly consisted of the Soviet-built *Polikarpov R-1s*. The first aircraft produced by the Soviet Union, this aircraft served in a variety of roles such as ground attack, light bomber, reconnaissance, and training (Rickard, 2011). Although these aircraft saw limited use, it became clear that aviation was crucial in a region with few roads, railways, or traversable waterways (Marion, 2018, pp. 28).

In 1928, the country fell into civil war. Airpower was rarely used in the early years of domestic conflict due to the harsh terrain and difficulty of operations. Despite their limited use, many of these aircraft were destroyed in the fighting. In 1937, Afghanistan rebuilt the Royal Afghan Air Force, this time with substantial British support. This iteration used the British *Hawker Hind* and the Italian *Imam Ro.37* aircraft. In 1973, the government dropped "Royal" and officially changed the name to the Afghan Air Force (AAF). During this period, under King

Zahir Shah's rule, the AAF received additional Soviet airframes, including state-of-the-art Soviet-built *MiG-15s* and *Il-28 bombers*.

However, the AAF would not reach the height of its power until the 1979 Soviet invasion to prop up the embattled Afghan communist government against a powerful anti-communist insurgency. At one point, the AAF had up to 400 aircraft and 7,000 active personnel (some of whom were advisors from other nations such as Cuba and the Czech Republic) at their disposal and were briefly one of the biggest air forces in Asia. Yet, it should not be ignored how much control and influence the Soviets had over the AAF. Soviet officers often would direct Afghan aircrews and not disclose the nature of the mission until the last second. Additionally, Soviet technicians maintained most of the aircraft (Marion, 2018, pp. 25). This level of outside support was crucial, and ultimately, unsustainable. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, and its eventual dissolution, the AAF lost its leading supplier of parts and maintenance personnel, a huge blow to the AAF's ability to maintain viability.

With the Soviet departure, the remaining factions in Afghanistan fought amongst each other, and the country returned to civil war. After the British withdrew their support in the mid-1900s, the AAF (still had "Royal" in the name) weakened. This period of declining strength was mirrored when the Soviets left the country. During this time, the warring factions scavenged most AAF assets. By the time the Taliban took over, many of the aircraft were useless, lacking spare parts and people who knew how to maintain them. Without the support of an outside nation (in this instance, the Soviet Union) providing material and technical support, the once-powerful AAF fell apart.

The U.S. Gets Involved

In 2001, after the devastating attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the United States invaded Afghanistan to drive out the Taliban and deny Al-Qaeda a haven. In the ensuing conflict, American airstrikes destroyed what was left of the feeble AAF. However, in 2005, the U.S. and Coalition forces set in motion a plan to re-establish Afghan air power. The thinking was that the new nation must have a modern air force not only to fight insurgents and terrorists but also to support and augment the newly established Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police. This would be an international effort, with multiple nations helping to train and equip new personnel. In 2008, Afghan President Hamid Karzai opened the new AAF headquarters located at Kabul International Airport. With twenty-six refurbished aircraft donated by the United States and the Czech Republic, the AAF was reborn (Morrison, 2018).

Since 2008, the United States has spent approximately \$8 billion to train and equip the AAF. On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban agreed to a peace deal in Doha. With the potential end of America's twenty-year involvement in Afghanistan, will the AAF be able to stand on its own? (Qazi, 2020). On January 10, 2019, the New York Times published a scathing article called "The U.S. Spent \$8 Billion on Afghanistan's Air Force. It's Still Struggling". In this article, reporter David Zucchino examines in detail the frustrating process of building up the AAF, with "no end in sight," and the possibility that the Afghan government "will rely on American maintenance and other support for years." The Coalition helping the AAF, primarily the U.S., is trying to get them to a state of self-sufficiency to fight insurgents on their own. This has proven rather difficult for a multitude of reasons (Zucchino, 2019).

Current State of the AAF

The United States sees the AAF as a fundamental component to the war effort, with the goal of the AAF being able to provide their own security. However, this has not always been the case. In a 2017 report from the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) titled *Reconstructing the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan*, vital capabilities such as aviation were "not included in U.S., Afghan, and NATO force design plans." (SIGAR, 2017). It was not until 2005 when the U.S. and Coalition forces decided to rebuild the Afghan air component. Initially projected to have full operational capability by September 2009, (Marion, 2018, pp. 47), the AAF's inability to carry out their mission with any meaningful impact led Army veteran and journalist Bill Roggio to comment, "The Taliban doesn't have an air force... They do quite well without it" (Zucchini, 2019). Right now, the AAF has 271 aircraft in operation (*Afghan Air Force*, 2021). Even with numerous advancements in airframes, maintenance, and operations, over the past thirteen years, the AAF has been unable to conquer a plethora of challenges.

One is a lack of a completion date. American commanders could not track progress for the air component because they never defined a timeline for what a fully functioning Afghan Air Force would look like and when it would be complete. As Anthony H. Cordesman, a security analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, noted, "There is no plan to create an Afghan Air Force as yet that could replace the role of the U.S. air component." AAF modernization efforts clearly suffer from an ambiguous timeline (Zucchini, 2019).

Another vexing issue for the AAF is safety standards. In the 1990s, senior leadership within the AAF would periodically change tail numbers to keep hesitant pilots from not wanting to fly a possibly unsafe aircraft. Other questionable safety practices included using coke bottle

tops as replacement parts and not coordinating missions with Coalition forces (Marion, 2018, pp. 42,60,82).

Right now, the AAF transports troops, supplies, provides close air support, and evacuates casualties. Are they up to the standard that the United States and its allies expect of them? Airstrikes from the AAF have killed civilians at a disproportionately higher rate than American ones. The United Nations (U.N.) has noted that the AAF has been responsible for fifty-two percent of civilian casualties caused by airstrikes in the first half of 2018, even though the AAF conducts far fewer airstrikes than Coalition forces. Some Afghan pilots have been known to pull away from confirmed enemy targets for fear of hitting civilians. This puts into question if the AAF is even confident in its ability to conduct strike missions (Zucchini, 2019).

Another challenge is the harsh terrain and weather of Afghanistan. Six times the size of Virginia, at 652,230 square kilometers, Afghanistan is a large country with vast airspace to cover. The landscape includes rugged mountains that can frequently experience earthquakes, flooding, and droughts. The topography limits the number of locations available to build a runway or even an entire base from which to launch operations (Afghanistan, 2021). As mentioned in the book *Flight Risk*, only two months of the year are considered suitable for flying due to weather. Outside of October and November, excessive heat, winds, and snow impede flight conditions (Marion, 2018, pp. 15).

Poor safety standards, harsh terrain, and challenging weather are not the AAF's only problems. The AAF has struggled to find and keep qualified candidates to serve in its ranks. In 2004, three years after the start of the war, there were no trained Afghan airmen. The last time an Afghan pilot completed formal flight training was in the early 1990s. When the U.S. mission to modernize the Afghan Air Force began, many Afghan senior military officials (mostly army

generals) sent their best recruits to the army. In 2011 nearly half of AAF personnel (roughly 2,5000) were untrained, with many illiterates (Marion, 2018, pp. 149). In a grand understatement, Afghan military spokesman Brig. Gen Wilson D. Shoffner said, "We're starting a little late with the Air Force" (Jaffe, 2016). When training did begin, many of the Afghan pilots used their newfound English and aviation skills to work for high-paying private contractors (Marion, 2018, pp. 45,57,64).

The AAF still falls short in its primary mission—fighting insurgents on its own (Zucchino, 2019). In March, I interviewed Ronald Neumann, Ambassador to Afghanistan, from July 2005 to April 2007. Ambassador Neumann explored one of the reasons for the difficulty of this mission. "We (the U.S.) tend to build foreign forces in our image, often more complex than they are ready for" (R.E. Neumann, personal communication, March 17, 2021). This quote is perfectly exemplified in the 2017 SIGAR report which concluded:

"Providing advanced Western weapon and management systems to a largely illiterate and uneducated force without appropriate training and institutional infrastructure created long-term dependencies, required U.S. fiscal support, and extended sustainability timelines." (SIGAR, 2017).

Path Dependency

After fully evaluating the current state of the AAF, it might be prudent to question why the United States has continued to support them for so long. One explanation is that the United States has been entrenched in path dependency. According to Caroline Banton of Investopedia, path dependency is a theory that explains why a government or entity may continue to use a practice or product based on a historical preference or use (Banton, 2021). When the United

States and the Coalition decided in 2005 that they would build up the AAF, they were setting themselves up for a significant investment with a long timeline. Once this policy was in place, it became borderline impossible to change. A positive feedback loop developed, where a vast and complicated network of politicians, military personnel, and contractors, all became vested in this mission to modernize the AAF. One of the reasons this path has not been abandoned, even after all the setbacks, is the cost of exiting this current course of action. If Afghanistan has no suitable air force, then the United States and other Coalition members would have to pick up the slack and conduct all missions that require an air component. Another hurdle to clear in changing course is collective action. One politician alone (whether they be American or Afghan) cannot determine the fate of this mission. The same principle applies to military leaders.

There is a tangible fear that the Taliban will march back into Kabul, regain power, and return Afghanistan to the civil war and repression of the nineties. The U.S. and its allies have helped usher in tremendous advancements in Afghan civil society, human rights, and freedoms for Afghan women (*Why Afghan Women Fear a Peace Deal with the Taliban | The Dispatch*, 2019). To prevent the loss of all they have worked for, the U.S. Government continues to send troops, supplies, and intelligence to Afghanistan to help the Afghan government maintain the upper hand and force the Taliban to negotiate a settlement that will protect these advancements. The U.S. does not want this two-decades-long conflict to end in defeat, even as it prepares to exit the country. As President Trump stated in 2017,

"Our nation must seek an honorable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made, especially the sacrifices of lives. The men and women who serve our nation in combat deserve a plan for victory"
(Hunter, 2017).

The problem is, what is the U.S. definition of victory, and is it truly achievable after all this time? What does victory look like in terms of rebuilding the Afghanistan Air Force into a credible, self-sustaining defense force? To answer these questions, we need to examine how the United States has built up another partner nation's air force, the problems it encountered, and the aftermath.

Country Comparison

In multiple conflicts, the United States has used its vast array of resources and technology to extend strategic and financial support to a fledgling, or completely nonexistent, air force. One notable example is Iraq. In the following pages, I will address how the United States supported the Iraqi Air Force, the costs and benefits associated with these efforts, and the two-decades-long outcome from this endeavor. The outcomes for these two missions (Afghanistan and Iraq) are very different—one air force still struggles, and the other is on a slow rise back to regional prominence. In this comparison, I will shed light on how many factors come into play when supporting another country's air force, what policies were implemented, and how different the results can be.

Iraq

Founded in 1931, the Iraqi Air Force (IQAF) has served in numerous conflicts such as World War II, the Six-Day War, War of Attrition, Iran-Iraq War, Gulf War, and the Iraq War. Throughout the IQAF's history, many nations sold aircraft to Iraq and helped train their forces. The IQAF had broad experience flying various British, Soviet, and French aircraft. The numbers and success they achieved were brought to a halt after the U.S. invasion in 2003.

Today the IQAF is still in the process of rebuilding and reaching pre-invasion numbers. Although they are in a similar position as the AAF (rebuilding while fighting off an insurgency), the IQAF has seen more success in its recovery. This is due to a few notable differences between the forces and the countries themselves. It is these differences that are important to keep in mind when comparing the two situations. The first difference is the history of the services. In its prime, the IQAF had 1,029 aircraft, with 550 of those being combat aircraft. Although they were considered weak by Western standards, they were also considered the "most competent in the Arab world" (Jehl, 1990). The most aircraft the AAF ever possessed was a little over 400, and although at one point they were one of the largest air forces in the region, they were never highly regarded as a superior force (Hodge, 2012). Additionally, the IQAF has had more battle experience, especially during their prolonged conflict with Iran (1980-1988). Although size and combat experience are important, the Iraqis also benefited from certain cultural characteristics.

As described in *Flight Risk*, Iraq possessed high literacy rates, a single language predominantly used throughout the country, a middle class, and a national identity (Marion, 2018, pp. 119). These factors helped the IQAF recruit and train higher-quality military personnel. From the U.S. perspective, Iraq's geostrategic importance, and their oil industry, made having a capable IQAF vital and thus was prioritized from the start of the U.S. mission (Marion, 2018, pp. 45). Rebuilding the AAF was not seen as a priority early in the war in Afghanistan. If it had been, maybe the AAF would be further along.

Costs

For fourteen years, the United States and its allies have fought long and hard to strengthen the AAF and make it an air force the Afghan people can be proud of and rely upon in

their time of need. This collective effort has seen mixed results, with the number of aircraft increasing, but combat effectiveness still in question. In this section, I will evaluate all the costs associated with this endeavor. In addition to the obvious financial statistics, I will examine other costs, some tangible, and others, less so—loss of life, public opinion, and the challenges of maintaining the training and support infrastructure, as well as the impact of the overall strategic mission of the War in Afghanistan that affects the AAF mission.

Financial Investment

War is not cheap. Last year alone, the United States spent \$693.058 billion on defense (*Office of the Undersecretary of Defense*, 2019). For Fiscal Year 2020, the budget for the Department of Defense is approximately \$721.5 billion (*Office of the Undersecretary of Defense*, 2020). The United States spends more on defense than the next ten countries combined. This list includes China, India, Russia, the U.K., and Japan (*U.S. Defense Spending Compared to Other Countries*, 2020). Although some would argue that high defense spending prevents war, many of these costs are attributed to maintaining and perpetuating existing conflicts such as the one in Afghanistan.

Although the efforts to rebuild and modernize the Afghan Air Force may seem like a drop in the bucket compared to the overall defense budget, they add up quickly and illustrate the high cost of propping up foreign militaries to maintain U.S. strategic interests. To modernize the fleet of aircraft the AAF operates, the United States is adding one hundred and fifty-nine UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters over a six-year period from 2017-2023. The cost for acquiring these helicopters, training the personnel, and sustaining them is estimated to be between \$5.75 billion and \$7 billion. This is a considerable investment given that up to 2019, the total spent on the

AAF overall was \$8 billion (Zucchini, 2019). Brought in to replace the Russian-made MI-17 helicopters, it will take time before the UH-60s are a fully integrated part of the AAF (SIGAR, 2019).

Another expensive program is the \$549 million investment the United States made in Italian cargo planes for the AAF. Bought in 2008, the twenty G222 aircraft were unreliable, spare parts were hard to procure, there were maintenance issues and safety concerns that involved several near-fatal mishaps. Six years after their acquisition, the program was shut down, and the planes sold for scrap metal. After investing \$549 million into the G222 airframes, the United States got back a mere \$40,257 total (Luce, 2021). A thirty-seven-page SIGAR report published in February 2021, documented the problems in the acquisition process. Amazingly, no one was held accountable for this expensive program failure (SIGAR, 2021).

Financial investment does not only apply to manned systems. In 2015, the Pentagon spent \$174 million on a drone program that would have helped the AAF and ANA conduct surveillance on their own. Equipping the smaller ScanEagle drone, this program suffered from a lack of accountability from Afghan forces, not knowing how to care for the equipment properly, and an inability to use the intelligence gathered by the drones (Gibbons-Neff, 2020).

Casualties

The most obvious non-financial cost in a wartime scenario is the human cost. Casualties often attract the most media attention worldwide and can be the number one reason to withdraw from a mission. The numbers are unclear on the exact number of military deaths in support of modernizing the AAF, but it has not been without human loss. Organizations such as the Brookings Institute track American, Coalition, and Afghan fatalities, however, AAF fatalities are

grouped with the Afghan National Army (ANA) (*Afghanistan Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-9/11 Afghanistan*, 2020).

Many AAF casualties result from helicopter crashes. As recently as March 18, 2021, an AAF Mi-17 crashed, killing the pilot, three crew members, five special forces soldiers—all Afghans (Deutsche Welle (www.dw.com), 2021). This incident comes after an AAF Mi-17 crash in 2019, that killed seven Afghan military personnel (Afp, 2019). In 2018, an Afghan helicopter crashed killing all twenty-five onboard, including a top Afghan commander. Incidents like these often put into question whether these helicopters are shot down by the Taliban or suffer from devastating technical issues. The uncertainties surrounding these crashes add to a long series of tragedies for the AAF (Staff, 2018).

Public Opinion

Public opinion drives policy and can ultimately affect the U.S. mission. Although there are no polls on the U.S. mission to modernize the AAF, there are a few regarding the war itself. According to the Pew Research Center, as recently as 2018, "almost half of all American adults (49%) say the United States has failed in achieving its goals" in Afghanistan (Oliphant, 2018). For many wars, public opinion has played a crucial role in the scope and duration of the conflict. A combination of geographical distance, the small percentage of the American population with military ties, declining casualty rates, and the long duration of the war have all contributed to a lack of interest and attention by the American citizenry to the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. War fatigue and diminished support will most certainly lead to U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the untimely end of the mission to modernize the AAF. As Ambassador Neumann said in our

interview, "If you don't have a lot of casualties, people lose interest" (R.E. Neumann, personal communication, March 17, 2021).

Political relevance is another consideration. The war in Afghanistan no longer receives the media coverage it did in the 2000s or even the mid-2010s. During the 2020 presidential election, the war was rarely mentioned. Presidential candidate Tulsi Gabbard said one of her top priorities was to end "wasteful wars." This comment did not even focus on Afghanistan but rather on military action in Syria and Iraq (Richard Lardner, The Associated Press & Price, 2019). Ambassador Neumann touched on this phenomenon by stating that "Afghanistan is not deciding how people vote in elections now." Its importance has diminished not only in the public eye but in the minds of Congress as well. Ambassador Neumann added that there was "no pressure in Congress" for the war. This diminishing interest in Afghanistan could be a blessing or a curse for the AAF. With less public pressure and awareness, it could be better for missions that require a significant amount of time to see to the end. At the same time, this lack of awareness can be seen as a detriment, as fewer people will advocate for continuing such a long and expensive mission.

Training

The United States has a proud history of partnering with allied nations to strengthen each other's armed forces, including their air forces. Although this strategy has worked well for other nations, the U.S. relationship with the AAF has been tenuous at best. In 2011, a twenty-year AAF officer shot and killed eight American military personnel and one civilian contractor. Similar incidents have plagued the American and coalition armies when dealing with the Afghan Security and Police Forces (Raddatz, 2011). In 2019, a program designed to let Afghan pilots

train on the AC-208 platform was discreetly terminated after more than forty percent of the pilots disappeared during training. Another similar program for the A-29 platform is being moved back to Afghanistan instead of its previous location at Moody Air Force Base in Valdosta, Georgia. This program also experienced desertions, but the report claims the reason for moving the program was enough Afghan pilots had learned how to fly the aircraft (Dickstein, 2019). Training issues have not affected only the Afghan programs. In 2019, a Saudi flight student, Royal Air Force Lieutenant Alshamrani, killed three American servicemen and injured eight others in a terrorist attack at Naval Air Station Pensacola.

Incidents like these highlight the numerous challenges in training Afghans. In January 2020, I interviewed Captain David Diorio, Ph.D., USN, retired, by email. In my conversation with Captain Diorio, he mentioned that many Afghans do not speak English, so the applicant pool is already very narrow. Additionally, those who speak English are usually well off and may not be as enthusiastic about undertaking grueling flight training. Americans must also be cognizant of not spending time and money training the enemy. The murders of American military and civilian personnel by the people they were training highlight the dangers of modernizing foreign militaries where culture and ideological differences may create enemies hiding in plain sight. Determining who is loyal to the program can be a lengthy and expensive process.

Another training challenge is actual time in the cockpit. Because getting actual flight hours can be expensive and lead to a myriad of maintenance issues, most American pilots spend countless hours in trainers. Although NATO operates some helicopter trainers out of Shindand Air Base, Herat Province, to allow Afghan pilots to train and gain proficiency in their respective aircraft, the Afghans will need to develop a comprehensive training complex of their own. (D.R.

DiOrio, personal communication, January 26, 2021). The sharing of knowledge also is an issue within the Afghan ranks. Due to a lack of a retirement system for Afghan military members, older Afghan pilots and maintainers often were less willing to share information that could help their younger counterparts. (Marion, 2018, pp. 57).

Contractors

It is hard to pick out any winners in this brutal and seemingly never-ending conflict. Who benefits from the U.S. government pouring billions of dollars into Afghan's fledgling air force? The obvious answer is the Afghan people. If the AAF can carry out every mission set and conduct all maintenance on their aircraft without American and Coalition assistance, then the mission will have been a success. The Afghan people will have an air force that they can be proud of and one that can effectively defend their nation from the Taliban and other insurgents. However, another less obvious winner is the military contractor, who wins whether the war reaches a conclusion or not. The contractor is a unique entity in the realm of modern warfare—a business entity that does not represent any nation. The contractor can offer its services for security, maintenance, intelligence, construction, and more. Often coming at a price cheaper than that of the government equivalent, many contractors are agile, can take risks the American forces cannot and can be seen as a cost-saving measure.

For many governments around the world, contractors play an integral role in supporting military missions. Even the U.S. military relies heavily on contractors and private military companies or "PMCs." In March 2021, I interviewed Colonel Tobias Switzer, U.S. Air Force combat aviation advisor, foreign area officer, and Olmsted Scholar. During our conversation, Colonel Switzer said that around ninety percent of the effort to modernize the AAF is done by

contractors and that almost every modern air force relies heavily on them. This includes security, maintenance, language training, and more (T.B. Switzer personal communication, March 10, 2021). In his article for the Modern War Institute, Colonel Switzer explains how contractors can be, and often are, extremely useful. Not only do their services come at a lower cost, but they are lower profile than your average U.S. service member in a uniform (Switzer, 2021). When a service member dies overseas, it can draw heavy media coverage and scrutiny. This same attention generally does not apply to contractors and thus politically, makes their use more beneficial to the United States.

Ultimately, these contractors exist to make money. In our interview, Colonel Switzer touched on how seemingly never-ending missions such as the one in Afghanistan are like a "pot of gold" for these companies. The contracts are quite lucrative—maintenance for the UH-60s from 2019-2023 is estimated to be around \$2.8 billion. The importance of contractors is not going away anytime soon. According to the 2019 SIGAR report, "it is likely that the AAF and SMW (Special Mission Wing) will continue to rely on contracted maintenance to support the UH-60 beyond 2023." While the individuals on the ground want to see progress in their mission, from a business standpoint, the military contractors benefit financially from the war continuing for as long as possible.

Benefits

Throughout the ongoing process to strengthen and modernize the AAF, there have varying levels of success. This success can be measured in numerous ways, some more impactful than others. Producing a crop of newly minted, English-speaking, ready-to-fly Afghan aviators is more crucial to the U.S. mission than one Afghan pilot being able to moderately fly their aircraft

without crashing. I will present the two critical benefits that the U.S. strategy has produced and how each one relates to the overall mission. Although these purported benefits seem great on paper, they have yet to fully materialize into measurable results.

Regional Security

When the war in Afghanistan began, the U.S. goal was to punish those responsible for the attacks on September 11 and destroy their safe haven in Afghanistan by defeating the Taliban. The United States was clinical in its fight. In just two short months, the Taliban had been driven out of their positions in Herat, Kabul, Jalalabad, and finally Kandahar (Laub, 2017). Often overlooked in this opening attack is the crucial role airpower played. U.S. aircraft targeted Al-Qaeda and Taliban positions repeatedly before any ground troops arrived. In 2021, the goal now is to stabilize the region and bring peace to Afghanistan by preventing the Taliban's return to power and their attempts to reverse the progress made in the region over the last twenty years. Afghan civil society has flourished under U.S. protection. There have been monumental changes in human rights, although there is still a long way to go. The strength and effectiveness of the AAF is just one piece of the puzzle; many factors play into this mission. But in the world of armed conflict, a strong air component is not only important but vital.

Keeping the Afghan government intact and having an effective AAF will help with regional security. Throughout its history, Afghanistan has been host to various terrorist organizations. Additionally, Afghanistan shares a border with a known U.S. rival, Iran. A strong Afghan Air Force would give the United States another asset to deal with these strategic threats. A modern air force would bolster the Afghan Security and Police Forces, making the Afghan military stronger. With a strong, stable ally in the region, the United States would feel more

comfortable in strategic competitions against non-state actors and nations, and the AAF could fulfill its mission of protecting Afghanistan from both foreign and domestic threats with professional, self-sustaining airpower.

Less Strain on U.S. Military

Over the past two decades, the U.S. military has been heavily entrenched in sectarian conflicts throughout the Middle East and Asia. They have been doing this while also countering the rising threat posed by China and Russia. Many would argue that these varying interests are spreading the military too thin. The War in Afghanistan has involved a considerable amount of U.S. military resources. The U.S. has invested heavily in the Afghan military so it could eventually provide their security and no longer require U.S. and coalition support. Afghan self-sufficiency is listed in the SIGAR report as a key objective for the UH-60 modernization program (SIGAR, 2019). But despite the U.S.'s best efforts, there is evidence this has not been entirely successful.

A strong, well-equipped, self-sufficient, and most importantly, combat-effective AAF would make U.S. support unnecessary. As mentioned previously in this paper, the AAF is not any of these things, nor will it be anytime soon.

Alternatives

If the current strategy is not working, what else could the United States be doing? When evaluating these alternatives, it is important to consider multiple factors at play, such as feasibility, cost, timeframe, and more.

Maintain the Status Quo

An easy and often the first alternative to point out for any cost-benefit analysis (CBA) is "what if the company, country, etc.... changed nothing at all?" This scenario would involve the United States continuing its present course with no changes. We now know that by September 11, 2021, the Biden Administration is planning on having all U.S. forces out of Afghanistan (Sabbagh & Borger, 2021). NATO forces also plan on leaving by that date. Many analysts and journalists have already come out against this decision. However, if the United States continued its present course, how much longer would it take to complete a mission that has already experienced numerous failures and taken a great deal longer than previously anticipated? According to the SIGAR report on the UH-60 modernization program, U.S. financial commitments for this program alone run through 2023 (SIGAR, 2019). Staying for another five, ten, fifteen years would add immeasurable costs to this mission. Given the existing sunk costs and failures highlighted in this paper, doing nothing could be seen as a deeply flawed strategy where the United States is subject to path dependency.

Withdrawal of all U.S. Troops

Another alternative would be to withdraw all U.S. troops. From a cost-benefit perspective, this solution would generate the most savings in time, money, and resources. For years, this alternative is one that many have wanted, but most administrations had been hesitant to execute.

At the time of this writing, the Biden Administration is pursuing this alternative (April 2021). In his first press conference, the newly elected President said, "We are not staying for a long time... We will leave. The question is when we will leave" (Liebermann, 2021). This was

followed up by a promise to withdraw all forces by September 11, 2021. This withdrawal will be analyzed for years to come on how it will affect U.S. foreign policy moving forward, the future of Afghanistan, and more.

But how will U.S. withdrawal affect the AAF? It is not completely out of the question that the AAF will crumble with the state that supports them. As I have mentioned earlier, the mission's success is inextricably linked to the overall war. In December of 2018, Marine Lt. Gen. Kenneth McKenzie Jr. told Congress, "If we left precipitously right now, I do not believe they would be able to successfully defend their country." Additionally, Anthony H. Cordesman said that "The Afghan Air Force, while it is improving, has not in any sense offset the need for more and more U.S. air presence." If U.S. airpower is still needed, and the Afghan forces are unable to defend their country, then complete and total withdrawal could lead to an ineffective and incomplete AAF attempting to fend off the Taliban and various other terrorist organizations (Zucchini, 2019). In terms of the current plans to withdraw, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin recently said, "We will look to continue funding key capabilities, such as the Afghan Air Force." The United States has not forgotten the AAF in its plans to withdraw, but only time will tell if funding is enough to save Afghanistan's air force (Bowman, 2021).

Increased Coalition Support

It is important to note that throughout this conflict, the United States has had the support of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), commonly referred to as "The Coalition." Although the U.S. has had the strongest hand in strategy and has made the most sizable investments, they have rarely acted alone. Another alternative would be to request more support from fellow Coalition members. In 2017, President Trump made headlines across the

U.S. when he said that "NATO members must finally contribute their fair share and meet their financial obligations" (Baker, 2017). This comment was not targeted at the effort in Afghanistan specifically, but it can be applied there. All NATO members are leaving with U.S. forces by September 11, 2021, but what if they not only stayed but increased their support through additional money or personnel, both of which the AAF needs. It has been shown in past conflicts that NATO support can be quite useful, but how much more would be necessary to push the mission past the finish line? That answer is unknown and increased NATO support is unlikely if the U.S. withdraws.

Follow the Soviets

What lessons could the U.S. learn from the Soviet's experience in Afghanistan? For much of their history, the Russians heavily supported the AAF. So much so that in the early 1900s, the British considered the AAF "to all intents and purposes a Russian service, and may, indeed be regarded as a Russian advanced base" (Marion, 2018, pp. 9). From 1979 to 1988, the USSR was even more hands-on with their support when they fought to keep the communist government in power. When the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan after almost ten years, they withdrew their support for the Afghan military, which was then unable to sustain itself at the same levels and fell into disarray as infighting resumed amongst the various Afghan factions. When looking for a comparison to the current conflict, the Soviet experience in Afghanistan provides many of the same lessons, with similar conclusions (assuming the September 11th pullout remains).

Russia is interested in the ongoing situation in Afghanistan due to its geographic proximity and history with the country. Having learned a lesson from their protracted war, this other superpower and U.S. adversary is attempting to contrast the American "hard power"

strategy with "soft power." They are doing this by making several economic investments in the country to win back the favor of the people (Munoz, 2017). Is it possible that the United States could pull out and follow a similar course? President Joe Biden recently said that "We went for two reasons: get rid of Bin Laden and to end the safe haven. I never thought we were there to somehow unify... Afghanistan. It has never been done" (Sabbagh & Borger, 2021). These sentiments echo similar conclusions expressed by the Soviets in the late eighties. Mikhail Gorbachev decided that the deaths of 15,000 Soviet soldiers with another 35,000 wounded and billions of dollars spent were enough to conclude what many Westerners called "Russia's Vietnam" (History.com Editors, 2019). The United States accomplished its mission of ridding the world of Osama Bin Laden. While it is open for debate as to whether it has eliminated terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan, it has significantly weakened the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. If the U.S. discontinues its "hard power" strategy, what soft power initiatives will the U.S. continue to use to keep Afghanistan stable?

Since the early days of the war, one soft power strategy that has been the most visible is the attempt to win the "hearts and minds" of the Afghan people while simultaneously destroying the enemy with military might. These efforts have seen varying levels of success with increased access to women's education and freedom of the press, but terrorist groups continue to recruit in large numbers. Suppose the United States wants to pull out but continues to influence Afghan society. In that case, they need to continue support for a free press, women's education, and institutions like the American University of Afghanistan in Kabul. Whether the United States continues to support or expand its soft power policies remains to be seen, but it could be an effective alternative to the overwhelming use of hard power (*Applying Soft Power in the Afghan War*, 2018).

Conclusion

The United States was not wrong to attempt to build up and modernize the AAF to become a viable component of a secure and stable Afghanistan. Airpower is essential to winning wars, and the war in Afghanistan was no different. As reported by *The Guardian*, the reality on the ground, as stated by NATO members last month, is that "There is no military solution to the problems Afghanistan faces" (Sabbagh & Borger, 2021). This statement sums up the difficulty faced by the U.S. in its efforts to build the Afghan Air Force into a modern, self-sufficient combat force. Thirteen years after the U.S. initially tried to rebuild the AAF, there are still significant issues impacting this mission, as outlined in this paper. The financial costs are substantial and harder to justify to an increasingly disinterested American public. The training issues are complex and exacerbated by language and cultural differences between American and Afghan personnel. It is fair to say that most American people no longer care what happens in Afghanistan, especially what happens with the AAF.

I believe that path dependency—the resistance to change because of history—is what preserved a mission that, for the most part, has been a failure. The U.S. has had thirteen years to accomplish its mission. It is time that the U.S. recognizes that this mission is no longer cost-effective and that the best course of action would be to discontinue additional support for the AAF. Existing contracts, such as those for the UH-60s, should still be honored, but any other financial commitments should be placed elsewhere. Even though the departure of the 6,350 U.S. contractors currently operating in Afghanistan will have a devastating effect on the AAF, who rely heavily on them (Bowman, 2021), as well as on the profit margins of the contractors, this withdrawal ultimately will save the American taxpayer money in the long run from no longer having to pay to train AAF pilots, invest in new aircraft, develop AAF facilities, and more.

The new Afghan peace process likely includes a sharing of power between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Not only does this mean that Taliban members could have access to AAF resources, but they could join the organization as well. In effect, we will have built an organization our enemy now may be able to exploit. How will this sharing of power affect the AAF? The last time the Taliban had control of air assets, they were barely adequate. This time could be different, but I predict that if a heavily trained AAF still struggles with conducting missions and efficiently using their capabilities, then Taliban fighters with no training will not make it any better.

A capable AAF would have been integral in preventing the Taliban resurgence from happening in the first place. However, after thirteen years of investment, the AAF has not demonstrated the ability to perform its mission. When one invests in stock, and they lose money, what should they do? Continue to invest billions of dollars over two decades in hopes of getting a good return? I would say no. The AAF, although it has seen limited progress, has been a failure. It will fail when the U.S. leaves, and that is something the U.S. needs to accept.

Acknowledgments

At the time of submitting this paper, I will be one week away from commissioning as an officer in the U.S. Navy. I will soon enter a world where I could be a part of missions such as these. I think it is important that every American citizen evaluate the decisions of our military, no matter our position. This applies especially to missions that are not as well covered. Consider works like this and others that analyze specific actions of the military as a way of holding them accountable.

I want to acknowledge my shortcomings in writing about this subject. I am a twenty-one-year-old college student from Charlotte, North Carolina. I have never been to Afghanistan, and I would hardly consider my four years in NROTC as "military experience." I want to make it clear that nothing stated in this paper represents the thoughts or opinions of the United States military, federal government, or anyone associated with them. The analysis is my own and based on open-source evidence.

Additionally, I am aware that there was some information that was probably out of reach for me. I will never know if there was classified information about the AAF that I could not access for security reasons. I accept this and feel that I had enough information to reach a viable conclusion. Either way, I have done my best to explore this topic and argue my position with what was available to me.

There have been so many people who have helped me and guided me throughout this process. First, I would like to thank Captain David Diorio, Ph.D., USN, retired, for being my very first interview. As a family friend, I felt very comfortable talking to him, and he helped push me in the right direction when I was just starting my research. I would also like to thank Colonel Tobias Switzer for meeting with me and helping me throughout this process. His insight has been eye-opening, and I truly appreciate him meeting with me and sharing his article with me.

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