



THE TALIBAN'S SURVIVAL: FROM POST-2001 INSURGENCY TO 2020 PEACE DEAL WITH THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

The 2020 United States (US)-Taliban peace deal has essentially made the Taliban movement as one of the most durable and resilient insurgent groups in today's world. Following the 'levels of analysis' of international relations as an analytical framework, this paper explores the reasons behind the survival of the Taliban insurgency in an integrative framework that organizes the individual and group, state, and international level dynamics of this insurgency in a single account. The paper argues that the defection of politically and economically marginalized individual Afghans, the multilayered and horizontal structure of the Taliban insurgency, regional power configuration in South Asia, and the lack of a coherent post-invasion strategy of the US and its allies factored into the survival of the Taliban insurgency that resulted in a peace deal between the Taliban and the US.

Keywords: Taliban, Afghanistan, insurgency, United States, peace deal

Introduction

It was hard to imagine that the Taliban would be able to mount a resilient challenge to a large-scale commitment of forces by the US and its allies.

(Giustozzi, 2019)

The United States (US) and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies invaded Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks to dismantle al-Qaeda's terrorist network and remove the Taliban from power in Kabul. On February 29, 2020, after more than 18 years of US military presence, the US and the Taliban signed a peace deal that ended the longest war in US history. The peace deal called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan within 14 months if the Taliban abide by the terms to reduce violence. Although the peace deal has created a sense of optimism to end the decades-long conflict in Afghanistan, it has also provided a path for the Taliban to return to power. Previously, the Taliban rule in Afghanistan had far-reaching consequences (e.g., the spread of religious fundamentalism, a safe-haven for transnational terrorism) to regional and international security. Hence, any future Taliban rule in Afghanistan will have the potential to bring similar outcomes. Thus, a comprehensive analysis on the internal and external dynamics of Taliban insurgency is needed to facilitate future peacebuilding, conflict resolution and reconstruction in Afghanistan.

Therefore, the essential question is:

How did the Taliban insurgency survive for more than 18 years that resulted in a peace deal between the Taliban and the US?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The available literature on the Taliban within terrorism studies can be broadly divided into two groups- Taliban and neo-Taliban. Academic research on the Taliban began when the group consolidated control of most of Afghanistan and declared the establishment of the Islamic Emirate in 1996. Research such as Ahmed Rashid's *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* and Neamatollah Nojumi's *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War and the Future of the Region* are two examples which thoroughly studied the Taliban movement since its beginning in the mid-1990s. Alex Strick van Linschoten, in his Ph.D. dissertation titled *Mullah Wars: The Afghan Taliban between Village and State, 1979-2001*, explored the cultural, tribal, and religious dynamics of the Taliban movement. S. Yaqub Ibrahim's article titled *The Taliban's Islamic Emirate of*

Afghanistan (1996–2001): 'War-Making and State-Making' as an Insurgency Strategy provides us an insight on the group's war strategy that resulted in its capture of Kabul in September 1996.

Following the resurgence of Taliban insurgency in 2006 against the foreign troops and the Afghan government, academic attention shifted on the neo-Taliban. Anand Gopal, in his Ph.D. dissertation titled *Rents, Patronage, and Defection: State-building and Insurgency in Afghanistan*, has mentioned fragility of the Afghan state, the internal political economy of Afghanistan, Taliban's ideological resilience and its social position as most dominant reasons for the group's survival.

Adam Roberts (2009) thoroughly explained the limitations of the US's war doctrine and its failure in ensuring an inclusive state-building in Afghanistan. Robert Egnells (2010) showed how the 'hearts and minds' counterinsurgency approach resulted in gaining minimal successes of the coalition forces. Valentina Taddeo (2010) argues that the US's counterterrorism strategy in Afghanistan failed to address the problems the interventions created and, therefore, the subsequent counterinsurgency operations did not achieve significant achievements.

Antonio Giustozzi's (2019) *The Taliban at War: 2001 – 2018* provides a detailed holistic account of the Taliban's insurgency following the US-led invasion of Afghanistan. In an article titled *How the Taliban Won America's Nineteen-Year War* contributed to *The National Interest*, Arwin Rahi (2019) has mentioned about the following reasons for the insurgent group's success to survive-

- i. stalemate in the battlefield
- ii. failure to win the hearts and minds of the Afghans
- iii. anger and resentment for civilian casualties
- iv. collective incompetence and irresponsibility of the international community
- v. corruption by the Afghan officials

Following the US-led invasion in 2001, research on Afghanistan has been mostly focused on alliance-building, counterinsurgency, nation-building etc. However, a holistic understanding of the Taliban insurgency's both internal and external dynamics has been understudied within academia. Therefore, this research would like to address the existing knowledge gap.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Different theories on guerrilla warfare, insurgency, and state fragility nexus have been used by scholars to understand the Taliban's rise and survival. However, those theories do not provide an all-inclusive understanding of the proposed research question. Therefore, this article will employ the 'levels of analysis' framework of international relations to address the research question in an integrative framework that organizes the individual and group, national, international level reasons of the survival of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. Following this framework, the paper will argue that individual Taliban member's struggle for religious and material reward, the horizontal structure of the Taliban movement, inherent fragile nature of the post-Taliban Afghan state, regional power configurations in South Asia, and the incompetence of the US its allies at the international level resulted into the survival of the Taliban.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research follows a qualitative method. Qualitative research enables the researcher to explore meanings and insights in the given situation. The research employs a single case study method. It relies on secondary data, collected from published materials, different books, relevant journals, and evidence-based surveys conducted by different research organizations and think-tanks.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Rise

The word Taliban is Pashto, طالبان *ṭālibān*, meaning "students," the plural of *ṭālib*. The Taliban sees itself as a nationalist-religious movement, which fights the foreign troops and the Afghans security forces to bring back the Taliban Emirate (or Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, IEA) of the 1990s. The Taliban's ideology is a mixture of an extremist interpretation of Deobandi Islam (an Islamic revivalist doctrine that developed in north India in the 19th century), and Pashtun village culture (Alex Strick van, 2016). The Taliban movement first emerged in southern Afghanistan when a group of madrasah students led by a local religious cleric named Mullah Omar captured Kandahar province from local

warlords on October 3, 1994. Initially, the Taliban got popular support from tribes in southern Afghanistan, and Afghan refugees in Pakistan as it offered some sort of stability for the locals. Within a year, the Taliban captured 12 provinces before sieging Kabul, the Afghan capital. The initial attempt to capture the capital was repelled by the forces loyal to former Defense Minister Ahmed Shah Masud. Although the Taliban faced heavy losses, it regrouped and gathered strength in the following year. On September 27, 1996, the Taliban forces entered Kabul and overthrew the government, declared the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. By 1998, the Taliban controlled 90% of Afghanistan's territory. The Taliban Emirate got diplomatic recognition only from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan (Bulut, 2020). The Taliban leadership gave shelter to Osama bin Laden, an anti-Soviet war veteran who formed al Qaeda, and other likeminded individuals from different parts of the world who had a Pan-Islamic agenda. Osama bin Laden and his associates planned and directed international terrorism, and at the same time, bankrolled the Taliban regime.

Fall

The US and its NATO allies launched the Operation Enduring Freedom to invade Afghanistan following the 11 September, 2001 attacks by al Qaeda, whom the Taliban used to provide shelter. Following the invasion, the NATO forces and their Afghan allies defeated the Taliban from all the Afghan provinces. The Taliban fighters withdrew from Kabul on October 13, and from Kandahar at the beginning of December. The top Taliban leaders fled the country and took refuge in Pakistan. After the removal of Taliban Emirate from power Hamid Karzai was chosen by the Afghan representatives as the leader of the Afghan Interim Administration at an international conference in Bonn, Germany, and he was elected as the country's president later (Bulut, 2020).

Resurgence

Following the invasion, the Taliban leaders regrouped in Pakistani tribal areas and started guerrilla warfare against the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Afghan security forces. With guerilla assaults in the Afghan rural areas and suicide bombings in the urban regions, the Taliban started to control certain parts of Afghanistan from 2006 onwards. International coalition forces were forced to increase their presence in the face of the Taliban's increasing strength. Between 2009 and 2011, the ISAF command had 140,000 soldiers, 100,000 of which were from the US. From 2012 the US started pulling back its soldiers from active combat operations. On December 28, 2014, NATO ended the ISAF operations and gave all security responsibilities to the Afghan security forces. Later, a NATO-led Resolute Support Mission started, extending the Operation Enduring Freedom (Bulut, 2020).

Peace negotiations

At first, the Obama administration tried to initiate peace negotiations with the Taliban. However, all the attempts made in 2011, 2012, and 2013 failed. Negotiations broke out after the election of Donald Trump 2017. On February 25, 2019, the US and Taliban representatives met in Doha, Qatar, for peace talks for the first time. After eight rounds of negotiations, the two parties announced that they were close to a deal, which needed President Trump's approval in August 2019. However, a terror attack in Kabul resulted in the death of a US soldier and thus Trump cancelled negotiations. In December 2019, negotiations broke out again and ended with the declaration of an effective cease-fire. Finally, on February 29, 2020, representatives of the US and the Taliban signed a peace deal in Doha.

With this background, the next section will analyze the contributing factors behind the survival of the Taliban insurgency.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

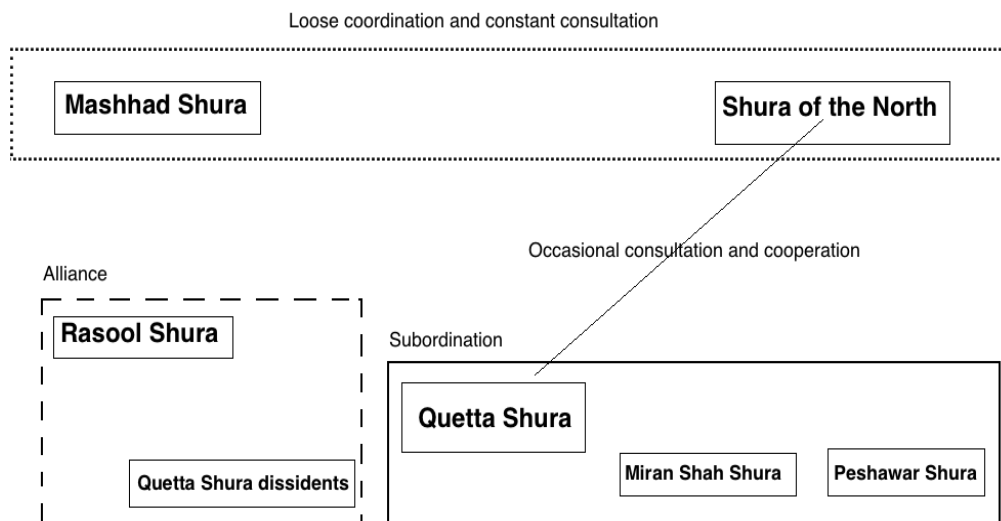
Individual and Group Level

Explaining the Taliban insurgency's survival at the individual level of analysis tries to explain the internal ethnic, tribal, and religious factors of Afghanistan. The Taliban are not a monolithic organization rather an umbrella organization incorporating several factions having diversified command and control structures. There have been different localized reasons behind the intensification of the Taliban insurgency, which have very little to do with the establishment of a Sharia ruled Emirate (Giustozzi, 2019). According to Anand Gopal (2017), the US-led invasion brought back warlordism and neopatrimonialism in Afghanistan. Hence, a large segment of Afghan people became disenfranchised and disempowered. Therefore, marginalization, political and economic exclusion encouraged the dissatisfied individuals to join and support the Taliban-led insurgency (Gopal, 2017).

An analysis of the Taliban movement's organizational structure provides a realistic understanding of the durability and survival of the insurgency. A Landinfo report published in August 2017, authored by Antonio Giustozzi, titled *Afghanistan: Taliban's Organization and Structure*, suggests that the Taliban became increasingly fragmented and decentralized movement from 2007 onwards. The central political leadership under the Quetta Shura has been struggling to maintain control over its regional shuras (factions) of Miran Shah, Peshawar, and Mashhad. From 2010 internal power struggles intensified within the Quetta Shura, which resulted in an open split of Quetta Shura into small factions. The report mentioned that by the year 2017, the Taliban had nonetheless evolved into a large organization having diversified military apparatus and a shadow governance structure. According to the report, as of mid-2017, the Taliban were organized in the following shuras/fractions-

1. Quetta Shura, under whose authority operate the following-
 - a. Miran Shah Shura: It is based in Miran Shah, Pakistan, and composed of the Haqqani Network founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani.
 - b. Peshawar Shura: This faction is based in Peshawar, Pakistan, and composed of several small fronts recruiting from the eastern tribes along the Afghan-Pakistan border.
2. Shura of the North: It is based in Badakhshan, Afghanistan. This faction reportedly splintered out of the Peshawar Shura by the end of 2015 and is composed of several Tajik fronts operating in northern Afghanistan.
3. Mashhad Shura: This faction is based in Mashhad, Iran. It has a large central force and also relies on some autonomous fronts. The front of current Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada reportedly joined the Mashhad Shura. This shura is still sometimes described as 'office' by hostile Taliban commentators as it was established as a regional command of the Quetta Shura back in 2011.
4. Rasool Shura: It is officially named as the High Council of the Islamic Emirate. This shura was founded by Mullah Rasool. It started to challenge the authority of the Taliban leaders from 2015, and it is based in Farah, Afghanistan

Fig. 01: The Taliban's Shuras and Their Interaction at Leadership Level



Source: Antonio Giustozzi, 2017

Therefore, this multilayered structure of the Taliban movement made it very difficult for the US-led coalition forces and the Afghan security forces to take decisive actions against the insurgency.

State-Level Analysis

Following the invasion, international donors contributed over \$25 billion in non-military aid for strengthening the Afghan state (Gopal, 2017). The international community expended billions on creating and training national army and police, on training lawyers and judges for justice-sector reform, and on building academic institutions. Nearly every state institution received aid and teams of international advisers (Gopal, 2017). The 2004 constitution was designed as one of the most liberal national ones in the world, which reserved 25% of legislative seats for women. The constitution also centralized state authority to an exceptional degree. The Afghan president had the power to appoint nearly all state officials in the country's 400 districts. This state-building project was accompanied by a multi-million-dollar disarmament program to demobilize and disband regional militias and transfer authority to the central state. However, Afghanistan became a failed state by 2015. In addition to the Taliban insurgency, narcotics trade made Afghanistan, the world's top opium exporter. In reality, the international community failed to create a state in Afghanistan in the classic Weberian conception (Gopal, 2017). Some warlords were given official positions while others were allowed to operate freely in the post-Taliban Afghanistan. Those warlords "divided the territory" into personal fiefs without any effective accountability to the central government in Kabul. The warlords also developed a neo-patrimonial state apparatus that further weakened the central government. The exploitation of the local population by the warlords enabled a positive environment of the resurgence of the Taliban (Gopal, 2017).

State-level analysis on the Taliban insurgency's survival tends to address the increasing frustration of the rural people and widespread corruption in Afghan government institutions at national and local levels and the lack of essential services. The appointment of unethical, corrupt, and ineffective government officials has significantly reduced the trust and confidence of the rural people, exposing them to Taliban recruitment (Smith, 2011).

Moreover, the top-down, Western style state-building project designed by the international community significantly undermined the traditional Afghan customs, culture, and way of life (Smith, 2011). Many of the failures of the Afghan government are due to the administration's hastily organization, top-down application of a Western-style democracy, which undermines the socio-economic and cultural reality of the Afghan people. According to Seth Jones (2009), the top-down approach to establish a centralized government in Afghanistan only succeeded to control small, urban areas and essentially reduced the government capabilities to a limited portion of the population. As a result, authors like Anand Gopal (2017) has described the role of the Afghan president as the "mayor of Kabul." Instead of creating a centralized Western-style democracy, scholars had previously called to create tribal engagement strategy and other decentralized arrangements to integrate the various needs of the rural and tribal populations of the country (Smith, 2011).

International Level Analysis

Role of Regional Actors

Pakistan

According to Coll (2018), the Taliban survived because of the support it received from the intelligence services of Afghanistan's neighbour, Pakistan. He argues, Pakistan waged a shadow war against the US interest through supporting and aiding the Taliban. The covert action arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), known as "Directorate S," has supported the Taliban both before and after 9/11 (Coll, 2018). The primary aim of Pakistan's pro-Taliban Afghan policy has been to ensure Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan through this militant group to establish a "strategic depth" vis-à-vis India. Coll (2019) has concluded that the sanctuary that the Taliban got inside Pakistan and the material support that the insurgent group got from ISI are the primary reasons behind the failure of the US to stabilize Afghanistan, despite sending tens of thousands of troops to the country along with other NATO members. Following the US-led invasion, the Pakistani leadership increasingly became concerned about the new geopolitical realities of the region. A stable, democratic, and functional Afghan state would become a natural ally of India, Pakistan's archrival.

According to a Taliban fighter:

...when Pakistan recognized that America was not serving their interests and the Indians were also strengthening their influence in Afghanistan, they started supporting the Taliban.

(Giustozzi, 2019)

Moreover, the US signed a strategic nuclear deal with India in 2005, which mostly allowed India to break out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and further develop atomic bombs. At the same time, Pakistan was denied a similar kind of deal by the US. Following these developments, the Pakistani leadership devised a strategy that strengthened the Taliban leadership to wage a sophisticated insurgency against the US-led forces and the Afghan government (Coll, 2019).

However, from the very onset of the US invasion in Afghanistan, Pakistan has repeatedly made efforts to facilitate a political solution of the crisis. Islamabad has provided significant diplomatic and political assistance to Doha to host the US-Taliban negotiations. Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Doha just days before the signing of the landmark peace deal and met Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani (The Times of India, 2020). Moreover, Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi attended the official signing ceremony, signaling the country's commitment for facilitating political settlement of the Afghan conflict. Recently, Prime Minister Imran Khan made his first visit to Kabul and reaffirmed Pakistan's commitment to further support "intra-Afghan" peace talks (The Indian Express, 2020).

Iran

Iran, Afghanistan's western neighbour, has pursued a profoundly shifting policy towards the Taliban movement. The Taliban's puritanical interpretation of Sunni Islam and its alliance with transnational jihadist groups like al Qaeda have been a serious threat for the interests of the Islamic Republic, a predominantly Shia majority country. As a result, Iran did not recognize the Taliban Emirate in the 1990s. Instead, Tehran supported the Northern Alliance, an umbrella group of several Afghan leaders that was fighting against the Taliban. Moreover, Tehran provided necessary intelligence support to the US-led NATO troops during the invasion after 9/11. Hence, Iran became a significant beneficiary of the overthrow of the Taliban regime by the US-led military intervention. The new post-Taliban Afghan government established a cordial bilateral relationship with Iran. Consequently, Iran had the opportunity to expand its political, economic, and cultural influence deep inside Afghanistan (Akbarzadeh and Ibrahim, 2019).

However, Iranian policy in the region significantly started to change due to its hostile relations with the US. Soon after the US-invasion of Afghanistan, President George W Bush described Iran as a part of an "axis of evil" in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002. This significantly changed the Iranian perception of the US in the regional context. Gradually, Iran started to provide safe houses to the Taliban leadership inside its territory (Giustozzi, 2019). Although initial Iranian assistance to the Taliban was very minimal, the Islamic Republic developed a very sophisticated channel of communication with several Taliban factions slowly but steadily. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has now become a significant source of material and strategic assistance to the Taliban insurgency. Today, an autonomous Taliban faction (shura) is based in Mashhad, Iran. The Mashhad shura receives military and economic support from the Iranian intelligence apparatus and recruits from the Afghan refugees in Iran (Giustozzi, 2019). The dramatic rise of the Islamic State – Khorasan branch's terrorist attacks in the region from 2015 onwards has further resulted in strengthening Iran's reliance on the Taliban to ensure its regional security interests (Akbarzadeh and Ibrahim, 2019). Most of the Taliban factions have given up hardline anti-Shia/anti-Iran doctrine to generate more political, economic and military support from Tehran.

India

Similar to Iran, India also feels significant security threats from the Taliban's alliance with global jihadist networks. Hence, India did not make diplomatic relations with the Taliban Emirate in the 1990s. New Delhi diplomatically supported US-led war efforts in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. From a geostrategic perspective, Afghanistan is a significantly important country for India as it can be used as a gateway towards other Central Asian countries. Therefore, India emerged as a very close ally of the post-Taliban Afghan governments and provided significant economic and technical assistance for Afghanistan's reconstruction. For example, the current Afghan parliament building is built by the Indians. Since the fall of the Taliban Emirate in 2001, India has provided US\$3 billion worth of economic and humanitarian aid in Afghanistan (Times of India, 2019).

However, India did not directly involve itself militarily inside Afghanistan against the Taliban. Two successive Indian prime ministers-, Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi- maintained a "policy of non-intervention" in Afghanistan (Firstpost, 2017). In 2019, US President Donald Trump has several times alleged India for "not doing enough in Afghanistan" (The Wire, 2019). Therefore, India's absence from fighting the Taliban militarily in Afghanistan has made the US leadership dissatisfied.

Role of Extra-Regional Actors

The US and its Allies

The Afghan war is the longest war for the US military forces. More than 16 years later, the war has achieved very little. Afghanistan is in ruin, and the Taliban still controls much of it. Three years after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, President George W Bush decided to pull resources away from the Afghan battlefield to focus on his war efforts in Iraq. This decision had significantly weakened the US war efforts in Afghanistan. Former President Barack Obama put vast amounts of troops into Afghanistan to try and knock the Taliban into a deal to try and win the war. However, the Taliban was able to survive and are now in control of more of Afghanistan since 2001. Hence, Trump administration initiated the most serious negotiations between the US and the Taliban to get a face-saving exit for the US troops from Afghanistan.

On December 9, 2019, the *Washington Post* revealed a series of classified documents titled *The Afghanistan Papers*. The Papers had about 1,900 pages of notes and transcripts of interviews with more than 400 officials that were carried out between 2014 and 2018 by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), and approximately 190 short memos from former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, dating from 2001 to 2004. The documents and the *Washington Post* stories suggest that there was no coherent US policy for the war in Afghanistan. Moreover, the report explicitly revealed that US officials repeatedly misled the public about its progress in the war (Saunders, 2019).

Moreover, the overall coordination among the NATO allies in Afghanistan has been problematic. Scholars like Giustozzi and Jones argued that divergence among NATO allies on counterinsurgency strategy and the ad-hoc implementation of multiple, sometimes conflicting counterinsurgency strategies by uncoordinated NATO forces have failed to deal with the Taliban movement (Smith, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The research aimed to provide a holistic understanding of the Taliban insurgency following the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan. The levels on analysis framework is used to understand the dynamics of the Taliban insurgency from different perspectives and landscapes. It gives us a framework to explain similar contemporary protracted insurgencies in different parts of the world.

The individual analysis suggests that the socio-political exclusion of individuals resulted in the proliferation of defection towards the Taliban movement. The group-level analysis suggests that the multilayered and horizontal structure of the Taliban movement has made it difficult to repeal this insurgency through conventional military means. The state-level analysis suggests that the inherent weakness of the post-Taliban Afghan state has empowered the Taliban insurgents to take control of the vast rural areas of the country. An analysis of the regional actors shown that the strategic interests of Pakistan and Iran have resulted in the implementation of pro-Taliban policies by Islamabad and Iran. In contrast, despite being a regional power, India did not militarily involve itself in the Afghan conflict. An analysis on the international level suggests that the lack of any coherent post-intervention strategy of the US and its allies significantly undermined the initial successes of the invasion.

This case study-based research helps us to understand the shortcomings in the US invasion in Afghanistan. The findings clearly provide us a holistic overview to understand the internal, regional and international dynamics that helped in the survival of the Taliban. Considering the findings, we can assume that the Taliban will remain as a formidable political and military force inside Afghanistan in the future. The Afghan government and the regional and international powers need to continue their engagement with the Taliban to reduce violence and facilitate a political settlement in Afghanistan.

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