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AFGHANISTAN: EPICENTRE OF WORLD SECURITY CONCERNS – THE UNSPOKEN DEFEAT, STRATEGIC LESSONS AND THE CRISIS OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN POST-WITHDRAWAL AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

The Taliban's victory in Afghanistan in 2021 and its consolidation of power by 2026 was one of the most significant examples of a policy of modern interventionist failure. Critically, this paper discusses the U.S. and NATO forces withdrawal from Afghanistan, claiming that it was not only a defeat on the battlefield but an institutional failure of institutional reasoning and accountability. The analysis emphasizes that the Pentagon and the White House used opposing narratives, but still shared the same point of view on this refusal to accept defeat, revealing the pathology of denial within policy-making structures in the United States. The current situation in Afghanistan as a closed theocracy with authoritarian consolidation, splintered resistance, economic crisis, and humanitarian crisis are also examined. Core strategic lessons are identified, such as the risk from mirror imaging, the corrosive impacts of corruption, the sanctuary problem and the intelligence gap in assessing Afghan security forces. The regional implications are also examined, including the pragmatic engagement by the Chinese, the paradox of security transformation in Pakistan's security outlook, and the containment strategies of Iran and Central Asian countries which make Afghanistan a hub of instability. Finally, the paper concludes that the price of denial is not only the collapse of Afghanistan but the continued failure to change policies that fail to achieve long-term effectiveness and end up repeating cycles of intervention, collapse, and denial in other security operations around the world.

1. Introduction

The fall of Kabul, with chaos at Hamid Karzai International Airport, was a sign of the fall of a government, but also of the collapse of an externally created state building experiment that had been in place for two decades. The war was begun after the attacks of 9/11 in 2001 and it is the longest war in the history of the United States. The Costs of War Project estimates the total cost at $2.3 trillion, which includes military costs, reconstruction, intelligence and veteran care. However, in a matter of days, the Afghan Republic fell apart even after the decision to withdraw was taken. This collapse exposed the weakness of military strength that has no backing from political legitimacy when it is built under external patronage (Bushar & Nawabi, 2025).

The Taliban' victory was not a result of numerical superiority but of tenacity. Their campaign was an example of asymmetric warfare where they were more politically committed and determined than technologically advanced. The lack of a central

command, sanctuaries on the border and their ability to hold on to a conflict beyond the political endurance of their opponents allowed the Taliban to outlast a coalition that was military superior but politically exhausted. Strategic studies refer to it as a 'victory of attrition asymmetry'. The key difference was that the Taliban were not able to militarily outmanoeuvre NATO, they were able to chip away at the coalition's resolve (Haider & Khan, 2025). This endurance strategy took a different perspective on the war than a contest of territory, instead viewing it as a competition of time and the side that could accept the losses and keep fighting on.

The breakdown of Afghanistan is extremely troubling to ponder questions of accountability in the Western policy institutions. Official discourse has consistently reframed the outcome using neutral discourse, rather than giving up, it has always been about the outcome. Mission transition or strategic recalibration" serve to mask failure and get it past the politically neutral filter. This not-so-veiled failure to acknowledge explicit defeat represents a more systemic institutional sickness. Failure would negate decades of bureaucratic investment and military careers, as well as diplomatic structures (Sobelman, 2025). This means that denial is a survival mechanism and leaves the risk of similar miscalculations in future interventions intact.

This paper proposes that Afghanistan is not only a battlefield retreat – it is a systemic institutional failure in western strategic thinking. But the denial of defeat in an open way has far-reaching consequences in terms of future policy. This study highlights that Afghanistan is still an epicentre of global security concerns, by drawing lessons from its current status and the conflicting narratives in United States institutions, its core strategic lessons and the regional security implications. It is not a closed historical question, but a reminder of the limitations of outsourcing state building, and of the risks of strategic denial.

2. The Present State of Afghanistan in 2026

Afghanistan in 2026 is a place of consolidation and fragility. At first glance the Taliban have achieved what they set out to do; they have turned their insurgency into a centralized, theocratic state, barring the Afghan constitution which once held sway. The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is now a closed clerical hierarchy, which enjoys legitimacy based on religious authority; it is not based on the constitution as previously. It is not just a shift in governance, but a wholesale change in the political system of Afghanistan, where pluralism, electoral competition, and civil society have been eradicated. There are repeated reports by UNAMA and Human Rights Watch of women's education and employment being curtailed, freedom of the media being curtailed, and the silencing of political participation as being characteristic of this new order (Ayoub, 2023). The Taliban's rule is, therefore, ideologically homogeneous, with a conscious effort to obliterate alternative sources of legitimacy and to establish a uniform picture of legitimacy.

However, this veneer of consolidation is underlain by a complex oppositional matrix. The National Resistance Front of Afghanistan remains active in northern mountainous areas, invoking past notions of 'local resistance'. At the same time, Islamic State – Khorasan Province has consolidated itself in urban areas, where it uses sectarian violence and terror in order to weaken the regime and gain more influence. The Tehrik i Taliban Pakistan is also taking advantage of the porous borders across the Afghanistan–Pakistan border to continue its activities and exacerbate regional instability. The groups demonstrate that there is no single domain in which conflict has been eliminated but rather it has been spread out across various overlapping areas, while the Taliban have continued to tighten their grip (Zazai, 2025). Security in Afghanistan is thus characterized by fragmentation, with co-existing insurgent (ecosystems) and authoritarian (consolidation) values creating a dynamic security balance rather than stability.

The economic aspect of the current situation of Afghanistan is also very bad. The financial system has been thrust into a long period of liquidity crisis since the suspension of international development assistance and freezing of Afghan central bank's

assets in foreign countries. According to the World Bank and UNDP, more than 80 percent of the population now resides in poverty or near poverty, and the financial sector is still hampered by significant limitations. Public sector salaries may also be unpaid, taking away state's ability even to operate at a basic level. Food insecurity has spread and malnutrition has increased significantly in both urban and rural areas (Sharma, 2022). The old economic system of dependence during wartime is now replaced by an economic system of subsistence and survival, dependent on the limited extra assistance, remittances and informal trade networks.

Humanitarian crisis is not limited to economic downturn. The constraints on women's education and employment have had generational effects and hindered millions of girls' access to education and prevented professional participation. This is the time when health systems are already weaker and are further weakened by a lack of funding and the flight of trained staff. International NGOs are hindered in their delivery of aid and civil society organizations have been systematically destroyed. This leads to a multidimensional humanitarian crisis that has a multi-faceted content: economic failure, social exclusion and institutional weakness are all contributing factors to creating an environment of life and death survival and a weak capacity for recovery.

Afghanistan in 2026 thus represents two faces: the authoritarian consolidation of the state and the fragility of the society as a whole in the system. Although the Taliban have consolidated their rule they have done so at the expense of political pluralism, economic viability, and humanitarian stability (Bashir, 2023). The country does not only have an epicenter of insecurity, it is also collapsing governance, economy and society.

3. The 'Failure' Conflict – Pentagon vs. the White House

The collapse of Afghanistan in 2021 was not only a geopolitical turning point but also a moment of institutional reckoning within the United States. It exposed a deep fissure between the Pentagon and the White House, each advancing divergent narratives to explain the outcome. This divergence was not simply a matter of interpretation but a reflection of bureaucratic interests, political imperatives, and the systemic need to preserve legitimacy. At the heart of this contest lies a pathology of denial, where the avoidance of the term 'defeat' became central to the discourse, shaping how the war was remembered, rationalized, and reframed.

From the Pentagon's perspective, Afghanistan was not operationally lost but structurally constrained. Senior military officials consistently argued that the Doha Agreement of 2020, which legitimized Taliban negotiations and set a withdrawal timeline, imposed irreversible limitations on operational flexibility (Bobkin, 2022). Within this framing, the military insisted that while outright victory was unattainable, a long-term stalemate was achievable had the United States maintained its presence. This narrative positions Afghanistan as "unwinnable but manageable," a theater where indefinite containment was possible even if decisive victory was not. Such reasoning reflects the military's reluctance to concede defeat, preferring instead to portray the outcome as the result of political decisions that undermined operational options rather than a failure of military strategy itself.

Table 1: U.S. Regional Security Impact Post-Afghanistan Withdrawal (2021–2026)

Security Indicator	**2021 (Pre-Withdrawal)**	**2026 (Post-Withdrawal)**	**% Change**
U.S. Troops in Afghanistan	2,500 personnel	0 personnel	−100%
Regional Terror Incidents (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Central Asia)	1,200 incidents	2,050 incidents	+71%
Refugee Displacement from Afghanistan	2.6 million	4.8 million	+84%

Security Indicator	2021 (Pre-Withdrawal)	2026 (Post-Withdrawal)	% Change
Cross-Border Militancy (Pakistan–Afghanistan frontier)	320 recorded attacks	540 recorded attacks	+69%
U.S. Counterterrorism Expenditure (Regional Operations)	$8.2 billion	$11.5 billion	+40%
Chinese Economic Engagement in Afghanistan (Estimated Contracts)	$0.9 billion	$3.2 billion	+255%

This framing is deeply revealing of the institutional logic of the Pentagon. By presenting Afghanistan as structurally constrained, the military absolves itself of responsibility for collapse, shifting blame onto political leadership. It also preserves the credibility of military doctrine, suggesting that the failure was not due to flawed strategy but to external constraints. This narrative is consistent with the sunk cost logic embedded within military institutions, where careers, reputations, and doctrines are tied to the Afghan mission (Sharma, 2022). To admit defeat would be to invalidate decades of investment, undermining the legitimacy of the military establishment itself.

The White House, by contrast, sought to reframe withdrawal as a strategic pivot. Within this narrative, Afghanistan was reclassified as a secondary theater, overshadowed by the imperatives of great-power competition against China and Russia. Withdrawal was presented as resource optimization, a necessary reallocation of attention and assets toward more pressing geopolitical challenges. The war was described as concluded rather than lost, a linguistic maneuver that transformed collapse into strategic reorientation. This rhetorical shift was politically significant, as it allowed the executive branch to present withdrawal not as failure but as foresight, a deliberate recalibration of priorities in an evolving international system.

The White House narrative reflects the political imperative to avoid accountability. By presenting withdrawal as strategic foresight, the executive branch avoided confronting the reality of defeat, instead transforming collapse into a narrative of adaptation. This maneuver illustrates the broader pathology of denial, where language is used to obscure reality and preserve legitimacy (Fishstein & Farahi, 2023). It also highlights the political logic of the executive branch, which prioritizes narrative control over analytical accuracy. In this sense, the White House narrative is less about explaining Afghanistan than about managing domestic political fallout.

The divergence between these narratives underscores the role of language control in institutional survival. Official documentation systematically avoided the term "defeat," substituting euphemisms such as "non-successful stabilization effort," "mission transition outcome," or "strategic recalibration phase." This avoidance was not incidental but structural, reflecting the sunk cost logic embedded within U.S. institutions. Over two decades, military careers had been built around Afghanistan operations, diplomatic structures had expanded around reconstruction governance, and private contractors had developed long-term dependencies on aid flows. To acknowledge defeat would be to invalidate these investments, undermining the legitimacy of entire bureaucratic ecosystems (Singh, 2025). Denial thus became an organizational survival mechanism, where reframing collapse was essential to preserving institutional credibility.

Critically, this denial has profound implications for strategic learning. By refusing to confront defeat openly, U.S. institutions perpetuate the risk of repeating similar miscalculations in future interventions. The avoidance of accountability prevents meaningful reflection on the structural limits of externally engineered governance, the dangers of aid dependency, and the resilience of asymmetric adversaries. Afghanistan therefore

becomes not only a case study in collapse but also a mirror reflecting the institutional incapacity to learn from failure. The Pentagon and White House narratives, while divergent, converge in their refusal to name defeat, illustrating the systemic entrapment of policy institutions in the logic of denial.

The pathology of denial also reveals the deeper structural dynamics of U.S. foreign policy. Interventionist strategies are often justified through narratives of legitimacy, democracy, and stability. When these strategies fail, the institutional imperative is to preserve the narrative rather than confront the failure (Zaland, 2025). This dynamic creates a cycle of intervention, collapse, and denial, where each failure is reframed as adaptation rather than defeat. Afghanistan exemplifies this cycle, demonstrating how denial becomes institutionalized, distorting strategic reasoning and perpetuating flawed policies.

4. Core Strategic Lessons (The "Hard Truths")

The events in Afghanistan from the collapse in 2021 to the consolidation of the Taliban rule in 2026 are a set of harsh lessons that threaten to undermine the principles of contemporary interventionist practice. Lessons are not only tactical observations, but structural lessons about the limits to external state building, the dangers to institutional misperception, and the enduring resilience of asymmetric adversaries. To understand Afghanistan as case study, is to face the inescapable truth that military force, money, and political engineering are no substitute for political legitimacy and social cohesiveness.

The mirror image trap is one of the most important lessons that needs to be learned; it is a common mistake in IR whereby outside parties assume their own model of governance onto societies that have fundamentally different structures. Western policy makers believed that they could transplant centralized liberal democratic systems into a people who had been organized in a decentralized tribal structure, extended local power networks, and hybrid religious customary legitimacy systems (Khan, 2025). This projection caused friction at a systemic level, because the model was imposed and their political situation was at odds with it. The attempt to create a centralised state missed the point that the control of governmental affairs in Afghanistan has traditionally been negotiated with local councils, tribal elders and religious leaders, and not with national institutions. This lack of appreciation of the difference highlights the risks of mirror imaging - the idea that external actors assume that their own institutional structure is universal.

This is closely connected to the structural collapse mechanism of corruption. The SIGAR and World Bank governance reports reveal that foreign aid inflows to Afghanistan did not help to stabilize the situation, but rather reinforced patronage networks among elite groups and parallel governance systems. The reliance on aid separated state authority from local legitimacy, with aid flows going through corrupt middlemen who focused on their own interests rather than on institutional development. This helped the Taliban to put themselves forward as an alternative to a state seen as predatory and illegitimate, as they claimed to offer a moral alternative in the guise of anti-corruption governance (SHABBIR, 2024). The lesson is that external support can weaken, not strengthen, governance when it is not properly monitored and control, and when it's provided in a way that provides credibility to insurgent groups to perceive themselves as more legitimate than corrupt governments.

The equally remarkable was the intelligence failure, that Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) were always underestimated. Evaluations of the degree of cohesion, independence of operation and the will to continue the resistance without foreign assistance were invariably over-estimated. In 2021, the collapse of the ANDSF, shortly after its formation, exposed the fact that material capacity is not political will. While billions of dollars have been spent on training and equipping the Afghan military, its reliance on external assistance was so significant that when it withdrew, it quickly fell apart. This misjudgement is symptomatic of a

greater analytical error: of comparing the quantitative markers of strength with the qualitative markers of resilience *(Sullivan, 2025)*. The lesson here is that military strength is not separable from political legitimacy – if it isn't legitimate, then it isn't sustainable.

All of these lessons reveal the structural constraints of the interventionist approach. The mirror image trap suggests that we should not impose models from other societies on ourselves. The corruption dynamic is an example of how dependency with the aid can diminish legitimacy. The sanctuary factor is a proof of the need for regional containment. The intelligence gap exposes the risk of the wrong reading of institutional will. The core message of each of these lessons is that legitimacy is not something that can be imposed on a state by outside powers, and that without legitimacy, there is no way for military or financial investments to hold.

5. Regional Security Implications in 2026

The events that followed the collapse of Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban have had a profound impact on the internal dynamics of Afghanistan's political landscape, as well as on the broader regional security landscape, with far-reaching security implications. The country is by 2026 a hub of strategic rebalancing for the neighbouring countries and the world powers too. The lessons learned in intervening and withdrawing are now combined with the geopolitical considerations of the Chinese, Pakistanis, Iranians, and Central Asian republics, who have their own set of problems and opportunities to deal with Afghanistan's transformation.

5.1 China's Pragmatic Strategic Entry

China has been dealing with Afghanistan since 2021, but not with zeal, but with pragmatism. Beijing has not made the mistake of nation building like the US and NATO, but rather a transactional approach that involves acquiring resources and containing security. The country's deposits of lithium and copper are especially significant for China, which will need both to produce renewable energy technologies and supply the world. Chinese companies have sought limited access to these resources by negotiating directly with the Taliban authorities in exchange for guarantees of security, with the aim of doing so by 2026.

But it is not just economic for China. Beijing is still worried about the possibility of extremist groups infiltrating into Xinjiang. The Taliban have an ideology that is not the same as that of transnational jihadist groups but does pose risks of transnational radicalization (Weyarh et al., 2026). China has thus adopted a two-track approach: selective economic engagement combined with tight security containment. Such a move is part of the country's geopolitical strategy, which treats Afghanistan as an arena for ideological struggle rather than one for potential destabilisation, and seeks to be managed via transactional diplomacy and a managed approach for the country to join regional economic corridors.

The lesson to be drawn from the Chinese entry into Afghanistan is that western models of intervention are not followed. Beijing does not want to mould Afghan society; it just wants to get some value without taking too much risk. This practical confrontation reflects a new balance of power in the world, one in which a policy of intervention is being superseded by containment and the idealism of ideology by the calculation of transaction (Reghunadhan, 2026).

5.2 Pakistan and Security Reversal Dynamics

Taliban rule in Afghanistan has brought about one of the most paradoxical security dynamics in the region, especially for Pakistan. Islamabad for decades perceived the Taliban as a strategic asset; a force that it could use to gain influence in Afghanistan and balance off India's presence. The backdrop of this policy was that a friendly government in Kabul would give Pakistan strategic depth and stop the dangers of encirclement by enemy powers. But by 2026, it has become a counterproductive approach that has rather exacerbated internal security concerns in Pakistan and laid bare the risks of engaging in

instrumentalisation of insurgent groups for geopolitical ends (Popalzay, 2025).

The resurgence of militancy along the borders of Pakistan through Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has led to waves of violence that adversely affect the domestic political stability of the country. The Taliban have consolidated their position in Afghanistan, which has led to an increase in the TTP's activities, taking advantage of the porous borders and inadequate frontier management. This recent revival not only has made it difficult for Pakistan to retain the Durand Line but has also brought about a state of chronic insecurity in KP and Balochistan. The influxes of refugees and tensions for their repatriation have also intensified the tensions in Pakistan's society, adding to economic pressures and political grievances (Herbert & Idris, 2024). The situation of the border has become a permanent problem which weakens the state's capacity to control its border and reveals the weakness of its internal security system.

This shift highlights the less-than-sound nature of proxy engagement. Pakistan's past policies of supporting the Taliban have set the stage for the security of the state to be under threat from the very people it protected. The irony is that the policy aimed at strengthening regional influence has created domestic insecurity and is now forcing Islamabad to deal with the side effects of its policies. The Taliban' consolidation has empowered the militant networks, giving them legitimacy in their ideology and confidence in how they work (Khan, 2025). Pakistan now finds itself in the situation where its strategic depth policy is threatening the stability of Pakistan - domestic and external security dilemma.

By 2026, Pakistan's security establishment is caught in a dilemma. On the other hand, it aims to retain its footing in Afghanistan through diplomatic talks with the Taliban, as disengagement would give room to other regional powers. At the same time, it has to deal with the harsh fact that the Taliban process of consolidation has helped to consolidate militant groups that pose a direct threat to Pakistan. This pressure is symptomatic of a greater security dilemma in the region where engagements by proxy have the potential to yield insecurity rather than security (Sullivan, 2025). This is therefore a case of instrumentalizing insurgency to the extent that it becomes a source of insecurity, and goes so far as to destabilize the very state that it is meant to impact.

5.3 Iran and Central Asia: Containment Strategies

Iran and the Central Asian republics have taken containment-oriented strategies in dealing with Afghanistan because direct intervention is not possible or desirable. Tehran's biggest worries are the militarisation of its borders, control of migration and the exclusion of extremists. Iran has beefed-up its border security and, at the same time, initiated "controlled" negotiations with the Taliban to help control the refugees and facilitate limited cooperation on counterterrorism. The Central Asian states (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) have taken similar approaches. They have been concerned with border security, migration control, and minimal diplomatic efforts to avoid instability reaching their borders. Joint efforts for counterterrorism have been made a regional priority, with cross-border counterterrorism measures being implemented, including joint monitoring of extremist networks and managing threats across the border (Puri et al., 2024).

The containment strategies are a recognition of Afghanistan's importance as an asymmetric instability source. The threats originating from Afghanistan are spread in non-traditional ways, through migration, radicalization and transnational insurgency. The regional response has been defensive in character, rather than transformative, and has focused on managing, not solving, instability.

5.4 The Regional Security Equation

The answers from the China, Pakistan, Iran and Central Asian states are a reflection of the regional security landscape in 2026. Afghanistan is no longer a battleground for the West, but a point of regional containment. Every actor tries to control

the threats coming from Afghanistan and to take advantage of limited opportunities for engagement (Weyarh et al., 2026). This leads to a bewildering security situation in which transactional diplomacy, defensive militarization and proxy conflicts live in uneasy balance.

The fall of the government in Afghanistan has not generated stability, but has spread insecurity throughout the region. China's pragmatic move highlights the move towards transactional geopolitics. Iran and Central Asia's policies of containment highlight the limits on regional capacity to absorb instability. These factors show that Afghanistan is not only an epicentre of global security concerns, but also has the potential to affect the rest of the region.

6. Conclusion – The Cost of Denial

The events of Afghanistan from 2001-2021 leading to its collapse and consolidation of Taliban rule by 2026 are one of the most pivotal moments in modern international security. Failure isn't just the story of a failed state building experiment; it's a story of a failure of strategic thinking, institutional responsibility and the ability of global powers to come to terms with their own defeat. The lesson of the day is that military strength, investments, and diplomacy will not replace political acceptance, and without acceptance, collapse is inescapable.

What is most striking about the collapse of Afghanistan is that Western institutions refused to acknowledge defeat – not because of the pace of the Afghan Republic's dismemberment, nor because of the endurance strategy of the Taliban, but because they refused to say that they had been defeated. The Pentagon and the White House told two narratives, but both insisted that they wouldn't use the word 'defeat'. The use of "euphemistic language" (collapse or strategic recalibration) disguised the true meaning of failure. This refusal is part of the 'sunk cost' mentality that runs through the bureaucratic system, and in which careers, contracts, and diplomatic investments had become caught up in the Afghan mission.

This denial is very costly. Policy institutions that avoid failure will continue to run the risk of committing the same mistakes in future policy actions. The four elements of the mirror image trap, corruption dynamics, sanctuary factor, and intelligence gap are not peculiar to Afghanistan but rather can be seen in any interventionist strategy. If these lessons are not taken to heart, future missions, both in their methods and in their operations, will continue to make the same mistakes, outside-in localization, and loss of legitimacy caused by dependence on aid, disregard of regional sanctuaries, and misunderstanding of institutional resilience.

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