

Introduction

This monograph aims to provide military leaders, civil servants, diplomats, and students with the intellectual basis they need to prepare for further study or for assignments in Afghanistan, a nation that has been at war for 33 years. Officers in the Af-Pak Hands Program may also find it a useful starting point, but their intensive studies will quickly take them beyond the scope of this work. Students or scholars may also find it a useful primer for learning about Afghanistan. By analyzing the land and its people, recapping Afghan history, and assessing the current situation, this work hopes to set a foundation upon which leaders and scholars can begin their preparation for more specific tasks. It also will examine the range of choice for future U.S. policy toward Afghanistan and give suggestions for future study.

Much of the outline of recent events will be familiar to many readers. Just 2 days before their 9/11 attack on the United States, al Qaeda operatives posing as journalists succeeded in assassinating the commander of Northern Alliance forces, Ahmed Shah Massoud, inside his own headquarters in northern Afghanistan. This act was an al Qaeda favor to its Taliban brothers, a reward for their past support, and a down payment on the grief that was about to descend on the Taliban from the United States and its allies. With the heinous terrorist acts of 9/9 and 9/11, the Afghan and American people became tied together in a common war against al Qaeda and its fellow traveler, the Taliban.

After al Qaeda bombed our Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, the United States, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and others asked the Taliban to surrender Osama bin Laden. They refused. After

al Qaeda's attacks on New York, the Pentagon, and in Pennsylvania, the Taliban again refused to turn over Osama bin Laden and his accomplices. With the backing of its allies and a United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution, the United States took decisive action. With Special Operations Forces (SOF), CIA operatives, and U.S. airpower in support, the Northern Alliance and friendly Pashtun tribes in the south were able to vanquish the Taliban forces and chase them and their al Qaeda allies into Iran and Pakistan. Sadly, both Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden escaped along with many of their key subordinates. An international conference established an interim government with Northern Alliance and anti-Taliban Pashtun representatives. Hamid Karzai was named its interim leader.

The initial phases of Operation *Enduring Freedom* (OEF) in Afghanistan were successful but not decisive. From 2002 to 2005, a small American and international force tried to help Afghanistan to its feet. There was modest and mainly unopposed progress in development, governance, and the rule of law. With a "small footprint" force and not very much aid money, efforts by the Kabul government and its partners were not enough. The Taliban plotted a comeback and made detailed preparations from its sanctuary in Pakistan. With a priority on operations in Iraq, the United States was surprised at the virulence of the Taliban attack that began in earnest in 2005. India attempted to offset Pakistani influence through aid and economic policy. Iran tried hard to protect its interests in the west, and erratically aided the Taliban—its former enemy—in order to block the United States. China and Russia looked on warily, often seeking economic benefits. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia later tried to help make peace but was frustrated by the links between the Taliban and the Kingdom's mortal enemy, al Qaeda.

Only in 2008, however, after the war in Iraq began to subside, was the United States able to focus on its serious predicament in Afghanistan. The Obama administration redoubled U.S. efforts, stepped up drone attacks against insurgent and terrorist leaders, and surged U.S. civilian and military assets in hopes of bringing about conditions conducive to peace. At the same time, President Barack Obama declared that he would not support an endless war in Afghanistan. He noted his intention to begin a conditions-based withdrawal of American forces in the summer of 2011. Later, the NATO nations at the Lisbon Summit established a target date of 2014 for Afghanistan to take charge of its security nationwide.

How did the United States and its allies get to where they are today? How can that coalition understand the many wars in Afghanistan over the past 33 years? How should it define its interests today? How can this group of nearly 50 nations—working together as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)—help to bring this war to an end? To answer these questions, it is important to first examine the land, its people, and their culture (chapter 1). Next, we have to grapple with Afghan history (chapter 2), the Soviet-Afghan War (chapter 3), and the conflicts that followed it (chapters 4 and 5). As we move to the current conflict, we must also understand the basic theory and concepts that underpin counterinsurgency in the 21st century (chapter 6). This enables us to comprehend what happened during the 2002–2010 timeframe (chapters 7 and 8). Finally, we have to examine the potential choices that national leaders face for the future (chapter 9). Throughout the text, I draw heavily on my own published work with minimal citations.¹ The data in this study are the best available in January 2011.