

American Troops in Afghanistan (2001–2021): Can Neither be Left nor Taken Out

Vasilij S. Khristoforov ✉

Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow, Russia
xvsarhiv@rambler.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3964-1967>

Abstract. The article examines the reasons for the American invasion of Afghanistan, the main tasks solved by American politicians and the military in this country, the evolution of Washington's strategy and tactics during the military operation in 2001–2021, as well as the results of the 20-year American military presence in the country.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Afghan army, USA, American troops, Washington, Taliban

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Introduction

In response to the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, for which Al-Qaeda^{*1} was blamed² and its leader Osama bin Laden, who was hiding in Afghanistan, Washington, with the approval of the UN Security Council³, Launched military Operation

1 *The organization has been recognized a terrorist organization by the Russian Supreme Court. Unified federal list of organizations, including foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation (as of June 25, 2023). Available from: <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm>. (accessed: 25.06.2023);18+

2 *The organization has been recognized a terrorist organization by the Russian Supreme Court. Unified federal list of organizations, including foreign and international organizations, recognized as terrorist in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation (as of June 25, 2023). Available from: <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm>. (accessed: 25.06.2023);18+

3 UN Security Council Resolution No. 1368 of September 12, 2001. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Available from: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/un/organs/1619678/

Enduring Freedom to fight terrorism and eliminate the «Taliban»*. The United States intended to create conditions for building a democratic state in Afghanistan [5].

The terrorist acts of Al-Qaeda* in the United States in 2001 and the subsequent American invasion of Afghanistan forced us to look for new approaches to stabilizing the situation in the region. In 2001–2020 a number of authors, including G.E.Asotryan, V.Ya. Belokrinitsky, R.R.Sikoev, Nessar Omar and others, conducted research on various aspects of the US-Afghan conflict, its impact on the international situation, the policy of the United States and NATO in Afghanistan, the evolution of their military presence, the history of the modern political development of the country, analyzed the possible scenarios of the political process in the country. They conducted a comprehensive analysis of the military-political presence of the US and NATO in Afghanistan, assessed the main instruments of Washington's foreign policy, as well as the effectiveness of the use of military force, and analyzed the real situation in this country. The updated program of actions of Washington in the Afghan-Pakistani region, the transformation of the US strategy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan during the period of different American presidents are analyzed.

A significant contribution to the study of US foreign policy, the struggle of the US military against the «Taliban»*, the ideology and tactics of the «Taliban»* was made by foreign experts in the Middle East, such as A.Rashid, B.Rubin, P.Marsden, M.Bearden, B.Riedel and others.

The goal of the article is to consider how the American military presence in Afghanistan affected security in this country, to what extent the tasks were implemented; answer questions about the reasons for the low effectiveness of American military-political efforts.

Materials and Methods

We used documents of the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly (resolutions adopted in 2001–2021), official speeches and interviews of the UN Secretary-General; materials of the UN Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)⁴.

Another group of sources is American official documents, for example, bilateral agreements between the United States and Afghanistan⁵.

Materials of Russian and foreign mass media (newspapers “Nezavisimaya Gazeta”, “Independent Military Review”, “Rossiyskaya Gazeta”, “The Washington Post”, “8am.media”⁶) were also involved in the study etc.).

4 The United Nations. Available from: <https://www.un.org/ru/about-us/>

5 The Afghanistan Compact. The London Conference on Afghanistan, 31 January – 1 February, 2006. Available from: http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/index.html

6 8am.media [newspaper 8 am, Afghanistan, in Dari language]. Available from: <https://8am.media>

The main problems of the development of the situation in Afghanistan were analyzed using the historical and genetic method: the reasons for the entry, presence of American troops in Afghanistan, as well as their withdrawal from the country and the consequences (2001–2021) were considered.

Results

An Optimistic Start

Operation Enduring Freedom began on October 7, 2001, with strikes by American strategic bombers and cruise missiles launched from American ships against Al-Qaeda* and «Taliban»* military targets. On November 13, 2001, the «Taliban»* left Kabul without a fight; by the end of November, only the city of Kandahar remained under their control, where the leader of the movement, Mullah Omar, was located [5].

Moscow, like practically the entire international community, supported Washington's actions in Afghanistan, since the fight against international terrorism was a priority of Russian foreign policy⁷. The elimination of the «Taliban»* from the life of Afghanistan was in the interests of not only the United States and its allies, but also Russia, Iran, China [1:701–702].

However, as a result of air and missile strikes, and ground operations, the «Taliban»* detachments were not destroyed, they went to the Pakistani province of Balochistan and the North-Western Frontier Province. «Taliban»* leader Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden also fled to Pakistan. American intelligence resident in Pakistan Robert Grenier noted that the Pakistani army, while conducting operations in the zone of Pashtun tribes against foreign fighters, refrained from active operations against the «Taliban»*. He also claimed that the US CIA was not active in the fight against the «Taliban»* in Pakistan, intelligence at that time was more interested in Al-Qaeda* and Osama bin Laden [2:130–135].

Such disdain for the «Taliban»* in 2002–2005 will play a cruel joke with the Americans, since the Afghan opponents, having rested and replenished the contingent, will soon start a guerrilla war and embark on the path of open terror [5].

In an effort to restore its former influence in the Middle East, lost in the late 1970s, Washington was interested in forming Afghan political elite loyal to it. After ousting Al-Qaeda* and the «Taliban»*, the Americans embarked on state-building, the formation of an Afghan national army, security forces and other basic institutions (5). In early December 2001, an interim administration of Afghanistan was formed, headed by the American protégé Hamid Karzai [3:55–60, 170–184; 4:462].

Afghanistan was also of interest to Washington as a bridge to Central Asia, as a country that has borders with the geopolitical opponents of the United States – Iran and

⁷ Afghanistan, the war with the USSR, the emergence of the Taliban [Afghanistan, voïna s SSSR, poyavlenie talibov]. Available from: <https://jangaavaran.ir/>.

China. Once in this region, Washington began to implement its geopolitical plans by creating military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, through which American troops and cargo were delivered to Afghanistan.

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Washington did not have a clear plan for normalizing the situation in Afghanistan, and the position of different departments was not the same. Thus, representatives of the US State Department, headed by Collin Powell, proposed the introduction of a peacekeeping force capable of controlling Kabul and the most important regions of the country and ensuring the security of the entire territory of Afghanistan. The US military, led by US Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, was opposed to US military contingents being outside of Kabul, they convinced opponents that the Afghans should ensure the security of their country themselves [2: 144–147]. The Pentagon was more interested in defeating Al-Qaeda* than in state building.

As a result of the debate in early 2002, the option proposed by the US military was accepted for minimal interference in Afghan affairs. At the same time, the creation of an Afghan security force of 80 thousand people began. American strategists believed that they would be able to create a combat-ready national army in five years, after which in 2007 they would be able to withdraw their troops from the country. It soon became apparent that the calculation was wrong [5].

The main reasons that hindered these processes were: corruption of officials, weakness of the Afghan state bodies, openness of the Afghan-Pakistani border, through which armed detachments of militants, weapons and ammunition freely moved, low moral motivation of Afghan military personnel, a large number of deserters, recruitment into the army mainly by recruiting recruits [3:207–208].

Moscow also faced a significant part of these problems during the period of the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan in 1979–1989 [9:426–433].

Have the Goals been Achieved?

Considering that the main goals in Afghanistan had been achieved, in 2003 Washington transferred special forces, unmanned reconnaissance aircraft, and experienced intelligence officers from Afghanistan to Iraq [2:163]. The Americans believed that the «Taliban»* did not pose a threat to them, since the number of their non-professional units was insignificant [5].

However, in 2006, the US CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency came to the same conclusion about a significant increase in «Taliban»* activity, which could lead to the loss of control by the Afghan government over parts of Afghanistan [2:250]. Additional forces were needed.

US forces, using a clear, hold, and build strategy, entered the area occupied by the «Taliban»*, drove out or destroyed militant groups, and then transferred power to representatives of the Afghan government. The Americans could occupy any area, clear it of the «Taliban»*, but they could not be present there permanently. After some time, the «Taliban»* returned to the area where the power of the Afghan government was established, regaining their lost positions. Thus, American troops fell into the “Afghan quagmire”, just like Soviet troops in the 1980s. [9:13–14].

A kind of “swing”; with a partial input-output of military contingents will operate throughout 2003–2020. However, the introduction of additional military contingents did not lead either to the destruction of the main forces of the «Taliban»*, or to a radical improvement in the political and military situation [5].

Washington's New Strategy

The coming to power in the United States in 2009 of new President Barack Obama once again placed Afghanistan at the center of American foreign policy. The head of the White House announced Washington's strategy aimed at increasing the number of US troops, creating conditions for the subsequent withdrawal of US troops from the country at the end of 2011, transferring responsibility for security to the Afghan national forces⁸, improving state building in Afghanistan [7:459].

Thus, a new date for the possible withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan appeared – 2011, it was then that the American special services carried out a special operation and on May 2 in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad (50 km from Islamabad) killed the leader of Al-Qaeda*, Osama bin Laden. It would seem that one of the main goals of the American military presence in Afghanistan has been achieved and it is possible to sum up. However, this did not happen, and in November 2011 a new deadline for the withdrawal of American troops was announced – the end of 2014 [5].

In 2012–2014 the phased withdrawal of the main American military contingents, the transfer of responsibility for ensuring security in the country to the national army and law enforcement forces [5].

However, it soon became clear that Washington did not intend to completely withdraw from Afghanistan⁹. On May 1, 2012, in Kabul, Presidents Karzai and Obama signed the Long-Term Strategic Partnership Agreement, under which Afghanistan was given the status of “principal non-NATO ally.” American military contingents remained in the country, and since 2015 they have been mainly engaged in supporting the combat operations of the Afghan army, training and instructing military personnel¹⁰.

8 The United States prefers a limited build-up of the group. Available from: <http://www.inosmi.ru/india/20091201/156778125.html>

9 Volkov K. The United States will maintain a presence in Afghanistan until 2024. *Izvestija*. 2012. April 25:8.

10 What is behind the visit of the American general to Kabul? Available from: <https://news.rambler.ru/middleeast/30966665-chto-stoit-za-vizitom-amerikanskogo-general-a-v-kabul/>

By signing the strategic partnership agreement, each of the parties pursued its own goal: the United States maintained a presence in the Middle East, and the Afghan government received security guarantees and financial support¹¹.

Despite a significant reduction in the number of foreign troops from 132 thousand to 34 thousand military personnel, strategically important areas remained under the control of the Americans, in which there were nine large military bases: Kabul, Bagram, Mazar-i-Sherif, Jalalabad, Gardez, Kandahar, Shindant, Herat and Helmand. Statements about the reduction of the military presence alternated with the intensification of the actions of the US military. In November 2014, Obama signed an executive order authorizing US troops to take part in combat operations¹².

Thus, the announced plan for the withdrawal of American troops in 2014 became only a cover for the military presence, which remained until the end of August 2021 [5].

The situation in the region did not improve, and the billions of dollars spent by the United States on a military operation did not solve security problems¹³. Foreign experts in 2016 argued that almost half of the 101 infantry battalions in the Afghan army were unable to fight; the army was weakened due to heavy losses and deserters [7:482].

Against this background, American General John Allen, who commanded NATO troops in Afghanistan in 2011–2013, called the withdrawal of American troops “too hasty” in early September 2016¹⁴.

In the future, the words about the hasty withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan will be repeatedly uttered by politicians in both the United States and Russia. At the same time, the thesis about the longest war in American history will sound¹⁵.

The concerns of the military were heard, and in June 2016, Barack Obama allowed US troops to participate in combat operations together with Afghan units. The increase in the number of American troops led to the intensification of hostilities in areas that had previously come under the control of the «Taliban»* [1:710].

The new US President Donald Trump in 2017 tried to make changes to the Afghan strategy: intensify negotiations with the «Taliban»*, announce the imminent withdrawal of American troops, that the army will not be used “to build democracy (emphasis ours. – V.Kh.) on remote territories or the restructuring of other countries in their own way”¹⁶.

11 The United States and Afghanistan initialed a strategic partnership agreement. Available from: <https://vz.ru/news/2012/4/22/575568.html>

12 Obama signed a secret decree that will expand the powers of the US army in Afghanistan. Available from: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2617485>

13 A war without motivation: why the morale of the Afghan army is falling. Available from: <https://news.rambler.ru/world/32485039-voyna-bez-motivatsii-pochemu-padaet-boevoy-duh-afganskoy-armii/>

14 The US mission in Afghanistan is far from over – General Dunford. Available from: <https://uztag.info/ru/news/missiya-ssha-v-afganistane-daleka-ot-zaversheniya-general-danford>; The NATO mission reports a likely increase in Taliban attacks in the coming months. Available from: <http://af.gumilev-center.ru/archives/3033>

15 Imitation of a strategy. Available from: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3390743>

16 Afghan terrorism will be hit by unpredictability. Available from: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3390531?from=doc_vrez

Trump's intentions to end the intervention were combined with an increase in the number of US troops in Afghanistan from 10 to 16 thousand people (the "swing" continued to work), using new types of ammunition. In April 2017, the Americans used the most powerful non-nuclear aerial bomb, the Mother of All Bombs (with a capacity of over 11 tons of TNT), in the province of Nangarhar.

Completion of the Operation and Withdrawal of American Troops

The illusory prospects of ending the war with a victory over the «Taliban»* led to the fact that Washington began to look for an opportunity to end this military campaign and withdraw troops [5]. President Trump said Afghan missions had been completed and all troops needed to be withdrawn, leaving "strong intelligence" to monitor the situation and gather information¹⁷.

The diversified and numerous efforts of American politicians and diplomats led to the fact that on February 29, 2020 in Doha, US Special Representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalizad and Deputy «Taliban»* Leader Abdullah Ghani Baradar signed an agreement on peace and the withdrawal of American troops [5].

US President Joe Biden confirmed Trump's course. On April 14, 2021, the American leader announced his intention to complete the operation in Afghanistan and withdraw troops by the end of August 2021.

In parallel with this, in May 2021, the «Taliban»* launched a large-scale offensive, expanding their zones of influence, gradually occupying one after another large settlements, cities and administrative centers of the Afghan provinces, took control of the borders with Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and China. Afghan security forces attempted to resist in May and June, but by early August they had virtually ceased resistance [5].

Washington faced a dilemma: to stop the withdrawal of American troops, to send additional military contingents to counter the expansion of the «Taliban»*, or to continue the same course. A conundrum arose: "American troops: Can Neither be Left nor Taken Out." A decision had to be made. American intelligence, and military circles understood that the prospects for improving the situation were illusory, and there was no military solution to the Afghan problems. It was clear that the existing regime would not hold on to power. Washington believed that the main goals in Afghanistan had been achieved and hoped that the «Taliban»* would fulfill their promises to fight international terrorists and not pose a threat to neighboring states. Washington, as a result of its twenty-year presence in the country, has driven itself into the "Afghan trap." In August 2021, Washington realized that the game ended in nothing, but there was no other way out of this situation [5].

¹⁷ Pride caused by the status of a superpower: the United States has studied the reasons for the failures of American troops in Afghanistan. Available from: <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/650131-pentagon-ssha-doklad-afghanistan-neudachi>; Under pressure from security forces: why Trump plans to keep "strong intelligence" in Afghanistan. Available from: <https://ru.rt.com/duvv>

On August 15, 2021, the «Taliban»* occupied Kabul without a fight, in which there were still American troops. The President of the country, Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, fled, the national army disintegrated, and the entire state system that had been created by the Americans for twenty years collapsed. Some residents of the capital welcomed the new government, while others rushed to the airport hoping to leave the country on NATO military transport aircraft [5].

On August 21, the US President said that Washington sent its troops to eliminate Osama bin Laden and terrorism, and the Afghans were given every opportunity to determine their future. The Americans were unable to give strength to the Afghan government and the national army to defend their interests. This, according to Biden, was the reason for such a rapid fall of Kabul (5). However, experts believe that one of the main reasons for the quick surrender of the capital by the Afghan military was the illegitimacy of the president in the eyes of many Afghans. The turnout in the presidential elections in 2019 amounted to about 2 million people out of the 32 million population of the country¹⁸.

On the night of August 31, American servicemen who had been in the region for 20 years left Kabul.

A number of Russian and foreign politicians, diplomats, military men, political scientists and journalists will call the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan "hasty", "chaotic", "sudden" and even "flight". An unbiased view of the situation indicates that the Doha agreements were signed on February 29, 2020 and the withdrawal of American troops lasted a full 18 months. Compare: Soviet troops were withdrawn from Afghanistan within 9 months (from May 15, 1988 to February 15, 1989), while no one spoke about the haste of the withdrawal. However, the consequences that came during the period and after the withdrawal of Soviet and American troops were strikingly different for the worse for Washington [5].

Conclusions

The 20-year presence of US military contingents in Afghanistan has not led to positive results. The Americans managed only partially to solve the assigned tasks related to the destruction of Al-Qaeda*, but they were unable to introduce democratic principles, and the government, which had been supported by American bayonets for 20 years, actually fell even before the end of the withdrawal of American contingents. Once again, it has been proven that no government in this country will have sufficient legitimacy to stabilize the situation under the condition of foreign military intervention [5]. The American troops, like the Soviet ones at one time, were forced to leave the country, since there was no military solution to the Afghan problem.

The Afghan National Army turned out to be weak and unreliable, the reasons for its destruction lay in the peculiarities of the historical, cultural, social and religious

¹⁸ Soldiers or ghosts: How and why the Afghan army disappeared. Available from: <https://rtvi.com/stories/soldaty-ili-prizraki-kak-i-pochemu-ischezla-armiya-afganistana/>

development of society, the weakness of the country's political leadership. In the US-«Taliban»*-Afghan peoples triangle, the Americans left, the «Taliban»* won, and the people were defeated, most of the population is below the poverty line, and the situation has not returned to be normal ¹⁹.

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About the author

Vasily S. KHRISTOFOROV. Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. DocSc (Law). Professor. Head of the Department of International Security. Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow, Russia, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3964-1967>. Address: 6, Miusskaya Square, Moscow, 125047xvsarhiv@rambler.ru

¹⁹ Investigation of the causes of the collapse of the Afghan National Army; Abdul Sabur Janbaz 24 huta 1400]. Available from: <https://8am.af/investigating-the-causes-and-reasons-for-the-collapse-of-the-afghan-national-army/>; The Americans left, the Taliban won, and the people were defeated]. Available from: <https://8am.af/the-americans-left-the-taliban-won-and-the-people-lost/>

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