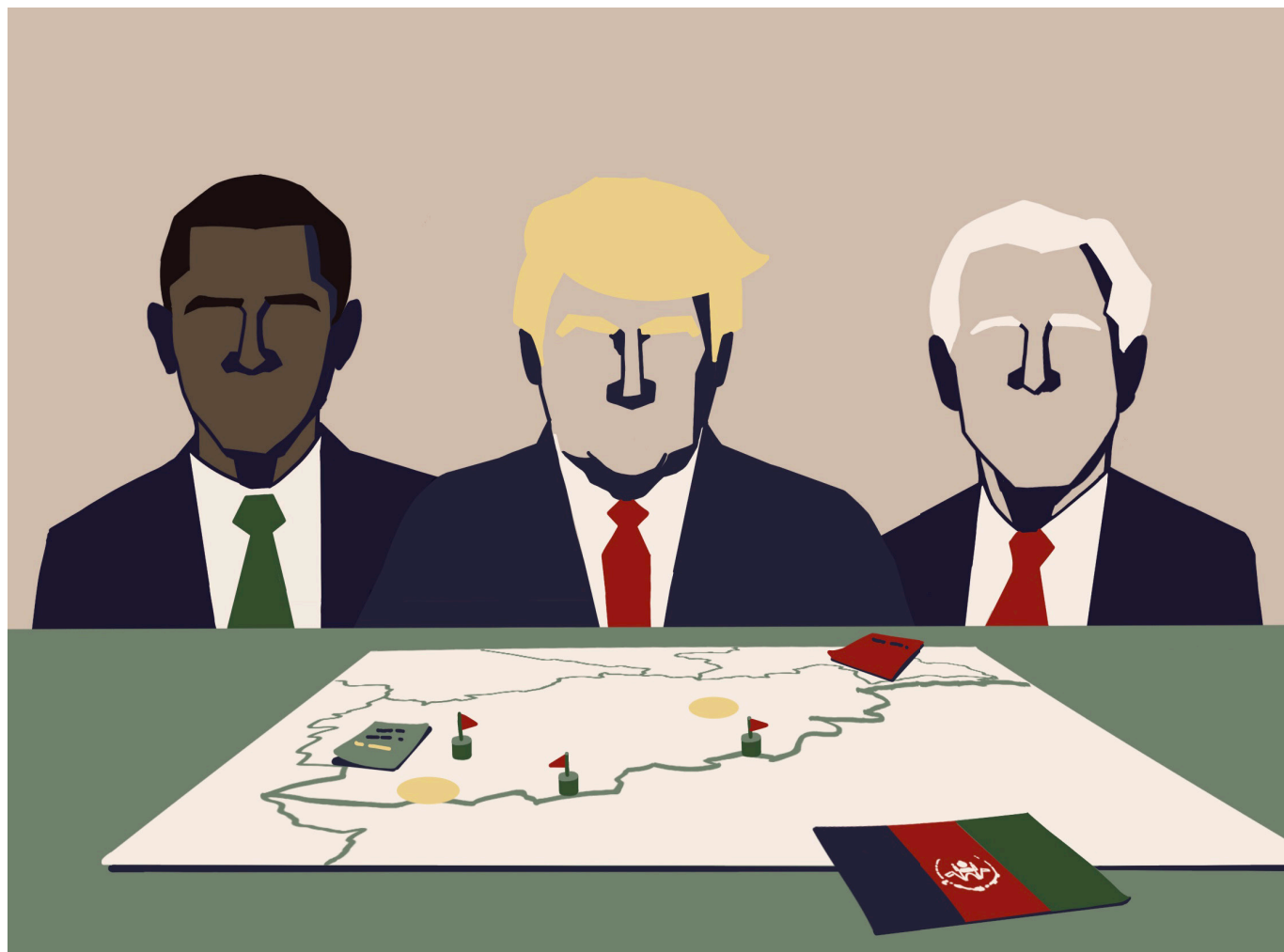


AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND THE AFGHANISTAN WAR

The War on Truth Exposed by Failing Policies



This analysis focuses on the Afghanistan War by examining the Bush, Obama and Trump Administrations' decision-making units and the implications their policies have had on the effectiveness of the war. What is now the longest conflict in modern American history has been characterized by policies that are sub-optimal and even damaging to America's interests and security. By employing the theoretical frameworks of Polythink and Groupthink, it becomes evident that members of these units, by virtue of their disparate worldviews, institutional and political affiliations, and decision-making styles, typically have deep disagreements over the same dilemma. It will become evident that the Bush and Obama Administrations' failure to adequately implement a strategy for end-of-war and post-war planning was due to the exclusivity of the military dimension in planning. Since the advent of the Trump Administration and the Agreement to Bring Peace to Afghanistan, there is an opportunity to develop a political system that keeps competition in the non-violent realm. The success of this agreement and the need for continued international support rests on the back of every Afghan - envisioning an Afghanistan that binds peace and unity together after nearly two-decades plagued by violence, division, corruption, and lies.

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Why has the Afghanistan War been the longest conflict in modern American history? Following the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. entered the costly *War on Terror*, launching two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. American foreign policy decisions during these turbulent years have often been criticized as suboptimal or even damaging to America's interests and security. A number of texts, individuals, and political structures will be of importance for this analysis. Former national security staff member of the Bush Administration, Richard Clarke, and his memoir *Against All Enemies* will be employed to evaluate involvement in Afghanistan as it pertains to U.S. counterterrorism efforts and several key actors in the military and intelligence apparatus will be evaluated to discover the influence they had on key decision-making processes. In order to illustrate the foundations of the key faults in the decision-making process, Alex Mintz and Carly Wayne's *Polythink Syndrome* will be employed. The author's discussion on *Groupthink* and *Polythink Syndrome* will be a vehicle for evaluating the Bush and Obama Administrations' approach to Afghanistan since 9/11 and its trajectory years after.

In hundreds of confidential interviews that constitute a secret history of the war, U.S. and allied officials admitted they veered off in directions that had little to do with al-Qaeda or 9/11. By expanding the original mission, they said they adopted "fatally flawed warfighting strategies based on misguided assumptions about a country they did not understand."¹ It will be uncovered that the Bush and Obama Administrations' failure to adequately map out a long-term strategy that would recognize and plan for foreseeable risks had a lasting legacy on the effectiveness of the Afghanistan War. Moreover, the discussion on end-of-war and postwar planning in Afghanistan was limited exclusively to a military dimension. Thus, *Polythink* and *Groupthink* syndrome will be employed as a framework for understanding these failing policies.

Before entering into this discussion, it is important to note the definitions of

Groupthink and *Polythink* in order to illustrate how it affected the decision-making apparatus of the two administrations. Mintz and Wayne define *Groupthink* as a "mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' striving for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action."² At the national level, this means that cohesive policy-making groups, such as the advisors to the President, often make suboptimal decisions as a result of their conscious or subconscious desire for consensus over dissent. As a result, they ignore important limitations of chosen policies, overestimating the odds for success, and failing to consider other relevant policy options. On the other hand, *Polythink* is a "group dynamic whereby different members in a decision-making unit espouse a plurality of opinions and offer divergent policy prescriptions, and even dissent, which can result in intragroup conflict and a fragmented, disjointed decision-making process."³ Members of this unit, by virtue of their disparate world-views, institutional and political affiliations, and decision-making styles, typically have deep disagreements over the same task. According to Mintz and Wayne, "the failure to prevent 9/11, like many U.S. decisions in the *War on Terror*, was a result of *Polythink* among and within key governmental decision-making branches."⁴

Responding to 9/11: The Inability to Map Out Long-Term Goals

In analyzing the reasons behind the stunning national security breakdown, the *9/11 Commission Report* pointed to several key faults in the decision-making process, all symptomatic of the *Polythink* syndrome: "communication failures, lack of sharing of intelligence information, and the ill-preparedness of various security agencies in the U.S."⁵ In the report, the authors find that key fault lines, such as between various government agencies, contributed to information sharing problems and confusion that allowed al-Qaeda to seize national se-

curity gaps. The lack of information sharing led to fundamental misunderstandings of the threats America faced from Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda terrorist network during the Bush administration. The authors learned of fault lines within the government – "between foreign and domestic intelligence, and between and within agencies... [they] learned of the pervasive problem of managing and sharing information across a large and unwieldy government that had been built in a different era to confront different dangers."⁶ Indeed, after the 9/11 attacks a "*Groupthink* siege mentality was particularly pervasive in the Bush administration."⁷ The stress triggered by an external threat, in this case the September 11 attacks, led to an overestimation of that threat. During the intervening time, if that threat does indeed become greater, the overestimation would still bear fruit. However, what becomes evident is that the chosen policy path failed to represent an accurate assessment of the threat and encouraged misguided assumptions about a country decision-makers did not understand.

Richard Clarke recounts his determination to push the Bush administration's policy intended to go after al-Qaeda. In January 2001, several months before the 9/11 attacks, Clarke "briefed the first Bush administration, Condi Rice, Steve Hadley, Dick Cheney, and Colin Powel. [His] message was stark: al-Qaeda is at war with us, it is a highly capable organization, probably with sleeper cells in the U.S., and it is clearly planning a major series of attacks; we must act decisively and quickly."⁸ Rice responded to Clarke stating that it "would not be addressed until it had been framed by the Deputies. [He] assumed that meant an opportunity for the Deputies to review the agenda. Instead, it meant months of delay."⁹ According to Clarke, the failure in the "organizations that we trusted to protect us, failures to get information to the right place at the right time, earlier failures to act boldly to reduce or eliminate the threat [were not taken seriously]."¹⁰ What was unique about Bush's reaction to terrorism was his

selection of a concrete example of potential state sponsors of terrorism. It was plainly obvious "after September 11 that al-Qaeda's sanctuary in Taliban-run Afghanistan had to be occupied by U.S. forces and the al-Qaeda leaders killed."¹¹ Unfortunately, Bush's efforts were slow and small; instead of his administration focusing on a country that had been engaging in anti-U.S. terrorism, he shifted attention and resources to one that had not been – Iraq. When offering the Taliban a chance to avoid U.S. occupation of Afghanistan failed, he initially sent in only a handful of Special Forces. This led to enhanced perceptions of threat and an aggressive pursuit of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. However, it also impeded the thorough considerations of foreign policy options, planning for contingencies, and long-term policy development. For example, only eighteen days into the Afghanistan War, Bush, already facing criticism from the media for slow pace of operations, determined that any indication of doubt from the president would ripple throughout the system. In response, "he sat his national security team down asking: I just want to make sure that all of us did agree on this plan, right? – they all agreed."¹² The failure to tolerate ambiguity and nuance and the incapacity or unwillingness to map out a long-term strategy that would recognize and plan for foreseeable risks "is a hallmark of *Groupthink*."¹³

The focus on invasion at the expense of reconstruction illustrated the overreliance of the Bush decision-making unit on the military brass, whose "dress uniforms with rows of ribbons highlighted their military expertise, which was a whole lot more extensive than [Bush's], at the expense of external experts in and outside of the State Department, who would have provided a different perspective and contributions to the deliberations."¹⁴ The emphasis of the administration on best-case scenarios and the overconfident view of the costs of the conflict were exacerbated by the early successes of the military phase of the war. Bush acknowledges this fault, recog-

nizing that in “retrospect, our rapid success with low troop levels created false comfort, and our desire to maintain a light military footprint left us short of the resources we needed. It would take several years for these shortcomings to become clear.”¹⁵ It is interesting to note that in many ways, these early failures to question assumptions, hear various perspectives, and explore alternative policy options during the initial entrance into the war, “spurred the *Polythink* group dynamic that would mark the decision-making processes surrounding the subsequent U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.”¹⁶ In an effort to avoid the *Groupthink* mistakes of his predecessor, President Obama’s national security team would spend months divisively debating a compromise “mini-surge option that had been critiqued from both the left and the right as a satisfying choice with questionable strategic merit.”¹⁷

Divided They Persist: Intra-Administration Division and its Chaotic Implications

When Obama took office, the war in Afghanistan was already in its eighth year. By then, the fighting had morphed into a full-blown insurgency and the Taliban looked unstoppable. They had adopted a “flexible, decentralized military structure and even a national political organization, with shadow governors and district leaders for nearly every Afghan province.”¹⁸ America was losing, and the enemy knew it. *Polythink* symptoms include “intragroup conflict, confusion and lack of communication, a paradoxically limited review of policy options, a failure to reappraise previously rejected alternatives, biased information processing characterized by framing effects, and most importantly, lowest-common denominator decision making or even decision paralysis.”¹⁹ Nearly all of these key symptoms were present in the early years of the Obama Administration’s national security team. Obama’s “team of rivals” remained sharply divided along institutional, ideological and generational lines that proved hard to overcome. In the words of former Obama Deputy National Security Advisor Douglas

Lute’s staff, “tribes populated the presidency, reflecting its divisions.”²⁰ This deficit of trust, as former Commander of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan General Stanley McChrystal termed it, “appeared unintentional on both sides... but over time, the effects were costly.”²¹ McChrystal’s memoir cast into sharp relief the internal divisions in the Obama Administration, suggesting that they were even more intense and disparate than previously known. Nasr claims, “the truth is that [Obama’s] administration made it extremely difficult for his own foreign-policy experts to be heard.”²²

In reviewing the book *Obama’s Wars* by Bob Woodward for *The New York Times*, Peter Baker summarizes the divisive portrait of the U.S. national security apparatus during the Afghanistan War Review process: “Infighting among various members of the administration was rampant; turf battles between the White House and the State Department were also prevalent; Richard Holbrooke, during his tenure as [SRAP], chronicles the discord and dysfunction between the State Department and the White House on end-of-war and postwar planning in Afghanistan.”²³ The many competing voices and conflict within the foreign policy decision-making unit in turn led to gaps in communication and confusion regarding the execution of war strategy and even extended perceptions of the overall policy goal in Afghanistan.

A damning investigation by the *Washington Post*, based on leaked government documents, revealed in December 2019 that “senior US officials failed to tell the truth about the war in Afghanistan throughout the 18-year campaign, making rosy pronouncements they knew to be false and hiding unmistakable evidence the war had become unwinnable.”²⁴ This reflected the internal divisions in the approach to Afghanistan, rather than the collective consensus that was being pushed to the public. The investigation, through an extensive array of interviews, brings into sharp relief the core failings of the war that persist to this day. They underscore how three

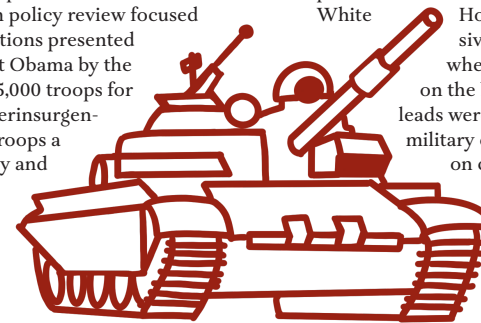
presidents – Bush, Obama, and Trump – and their military commanders have been unable to deliver on promises to prevail in Afghanistan. U.S. officials acknowledged that their “warfighting strategies were fatally flawed, and that Washington wasted enormous sums of money trying to remake Afghanistan into a modern nation.”²⁵ At the outset, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan had a clear, stated objective – to retaliate against al-Qaeda and prevent a repeat of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Yet the interviews show that as the war dragged on, “the goals and mission kept changing and a lack of faith in the U.S. strategy took root inside the Pentagon, the White House and the State Department.”²⁶ The result: an unwinnable conflict with no easy way out. The Taliban was not involved in the 9/11 attacks and none of the hijackers or planners were Afghans but the Bush administration “categorized Taliban leaders as terrorists because they had given al-Qaeda sanctuary and refused to hand over Osama bin Laden.”²⁷ Like Bush, Obama lacked an effective diplomatic strategy for dealing with the Taliban. In public, the Obama administration called for reconciliation between the Afghan government and insurgent leaders but the content of the report shows his advisers disagreed strenuously over what that meant.

In another hallmark of *Polythink*, the internal Obama Cabinet discussions surrounding the Afghan War had illusions of an expansive review process, but nonetheless centered on a small number of actual policy options. Indeed, the bulk of the Afghanistan policy review focused on three options presented to President Obama by the military; “85,000 troops for a full counterinsurgency, 40,000 troops a more fiscally and politically feasible option for counterinsurgency, and 20,000

troops for a plan that would focus mainly on counterterrorism operation.”²⁸ However, these many options presented only an illusion of choice to the young President. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry expressed reservations, stating that “we have not fully studied every alternative, and that we underestimate the risks of this expansion, by relying on forecasts that are imprecise and optimistic, potentially adopting a strategy that would increase Afghan dependency and deepening military involvement in a mission that most agree cannot be won solely by military means.”²⁹ Thus, though Obama did have choices, it had been significantly limited to the disadvantage of all.

Moreover, the discussion on end-of-war and postwar planning in Afghanistan was limited exclusively to the military dimension. Communication with the State Department on diplomatic courses of action was also minimal, and suggestions for diplomatic and political solutions were quickly discarded. Objections raised by Eikenberry regarding the feasibility of working with Afghan President Hamid Karzai were largely ignored. Richard Holbrooke, a staunch advocate of a more diplomatic process, was also silenced throughout his term as the SRPA. Throughout the review process, there was “no discussion at all of diplomacy and a political settlement... the military wanted to stay in charge and going against the military would make the president look weak.”³⁰ This failure had profound consequences: the Obama White House failed to aggressively explore negotiations when it had the most boots on the battlefield. Promising leads were left to wither, and the military once again capitalized on civilian disunity to pursue its maximalist objectives.

Individual advisors in *Polythink* groups may also possess an incentive for



processing or presenting information in a biased manner, “using selective pieces of information and favoring frame tactics to strengthen their specific perspective regarding the policy issue at hand.”³¹ For example, the military and the Department of Defense framed the war as a “battle necessary for the security of the U.S. both as a way to decimate extremists bent on attacking the U.S. and as a deterrent for future would-be terrorists.”³² Former Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, even declared in one strategy meeting: “the focus is al-Qaeda and the degree to which al-Qaeda would be empowered by a Taliban success. If the Taliban make significant headway, it’ll be framed as the defeat of the second superpower.”³³ On the other hand, members of the State Department framed the conflict as a liability to America’s diplomatic interests abroad and believed al-Qaeda could be contained without the counterinsurgency campaign advocated by the military. Rather than tamp down information processes and discussion in order to move the decision-making process forward, Obama often “peppered advisers with questions and showed an insatiable demand for information, taxing analysts who prepared three dozen intelligence reports for him and Pentagon staff members who churned out thousands of pages of documents.”³⁴

In the case of the Afghanistan War review process, Obama’s ultimate choice was deploying “30,000 additional troops in a form of counterinsurgency light.”³⁵ However, many political analysts have argued that the policy decision chosen ran the risk of achieving “neither a successful military counterinsurgency nor a successful draw-down and diplomatic solution to the conflict.”³⁶ Obama’s own advisor, Douglas Lute explained that the president “had treated the military as another political constituency that had to be accommodated.”³⁷ Thus, displaying the political divides that were truly at the forefront.

Despite Obama’s insistence that he must continue to carry out the Afghanistan War to a successful conclusion, the discon-

certing fact was that he owed his meteoric rise to power on his resounding criticism of U.S. war efforts in Iraq, but also Afghanistan. Obama had campaigned against Bush’s ideas and approaches. However, “Obama had perhaps underestimated the extent to which he had inherited Bush’s presidency – the apparatus, personnel and mind-set of war-making.”³⁸

A major critique of Obama’s handling of the Afghanistan War centered on his habit of inserting political considerations into troop decisions. One commentator claimed, “the President had a truly disturbing habit of funneling major foreign-policy decisions through a small cabal of relatively inexperienced White House advisors whose turf was strictly politics.”³⁹ Others argue that Obama really had no choice but to consider political ramifications of his actions in Afghanistan because “if he sped up this timetable and America’s Afghan allies began to go down the drain, it would surely become a major line of attack by republicans.”⁴⁰ Thus, the focus on political concerns deeply divided the decision-making unit, increasing *Polythink* and leading to suboptimal policy choices that may have been partially based on over-weighted, non-compensatory political factors. An inevitable imbalance existed between the military-intelligence complex, with its offerings of swift, dynamic, camera-ready action, and the foreign-policy establishment, with its seemingly ponderous, deliberative style. Ultimately, the differing worldviews and styles of information seeking, deliberation, and decision-making within the decision-unit would become a major obstacle in the Obama administration’s attempt to find consensus.

Striking a balance between *Polythink* and *Groupthink* in decision-making processes is a central challenge for leaders. In fact, the growth in the power of the presidency, the reach of a president’s decisions and actions, and the impact they can have all over the world make it essential to examine character and the ways in which it influences policy making and implementation.

Obama’s approach to his decision-making about the war contrasts with the approach of President Bush. The decision-making process in the Bush White House was often marked by “secrecy, a lack of deliberation, and the exclusion of members of his administration and the career services who ordinarily would have been consulted on important decisions.”⁴¹ Obama’s approach was instead “inclusive and more consistent with scholarly conclusion that ‘multiple advocacy’ would best inform presidential decision-making.”⁴² This style, however, was also conducive to creating a *Polythink* dynamic. The divisive infighting of his Cabinet and the overly extended nature of his policy review was not effective and quickly led to destructive *Polythink* – stirring even more group conflict, triggering confusion, and nearly resulting in a decision paralysis at critical moments of the Afghanistan War. Four years later, Obama was no longer making the case for the ‘good war’. Instead, he was fast washing his hands of it.

The Unorthodox Approach in the Trumpian Age: The Agreement Bringing Peace to Afghanistan and its Implications

Many Americans, including many who voted for Obama, want nothing to do with war. They are disillusioned by the ongoing instability in Iraq and Afghanistan and tired of almost two decades of fighting. They do not believe war was the right solution to terrorism, and they have stopped putting stock in the scaremongering that the Bush administration used to fuel its foreign policy. There is a growing sense that America has no interests in Afghanistan vital enough to justify a major ground presence. It was court opinion that Obama first embraced the war in Afghanistan. When public opinion changed, he quickly declared victory and called the troops back home. His actions from start to finish were guided by politics, and they played well at home. Abroad, however, the stories the U.S. tells to justify its on-again, off-again approach do not ring true to friend or foe. Vali Nasr, senior advisor to U.S. SRAP Richard Holbrooke states

“America is leaving Afghanistan to its own fate. America is leaving even as the demons of regional chaos that first beckoned it there are once again rising to threaten its security.”⁴³

The incoming Trump administration faced the same circumstances of the Obama White House eight years earlier. The Afghan forces were weak, “owing to poor training, inadequate motivation, uninspiring leadership and a high rate of desertion.”⁴⁴ Trump announced his new Afghan policy saying that although “his instinct was to pull out, and that historically he liked to follow his instincts, he had realized that decisions are much different when you sit behind the desk of the Oval Office.”⁴⁵ He contrasted his policy with Obama’s, saying that nation-building would not be his objective, and that he would not tell the Afghans how to live. However, Trump’s generals won his consent to a limited surge of “3,900 troops in addition to those already deployed.”⁴⁶ Stripped of its lurid wrapping, this struck most observers as largely a concise description of the Obama strategy to “to kill insurgent leaders; and to protect U.S. and international presence in the capital from attack by Taliban forces and jihadists.”⁴⁷

Where Trump’s version of the policy differed from Obama’s was on the issue of a sunset condition. Obama had established in advance a time frame for his surge and a date for the withdrawal of U.S. forces. This decision was widely criticized at the time as the incentive for the Taliban was “to wait out the U.S. presence and then restore its hold over Afghan countryside upon the departure of US forces.”⁴⁸ However, Trump stressed that conditions on the ground and not arbitrary timetables would guide his actions, adding that he “would not say when we are going to attack, but attack we will.”⁴⁹ Although he claimed the policy reflected ‘a doctrine of principled realism’ – a term frequently used to describe tempering of power politics by a concern for human rights and humanitarian interests – he defined the principle in question as ‘America first’ rather than any ethical imperative.

Moreover, the political logic of Trump's policy repeated the dubious American preconception that the "Taliban could be subdued and then pressured into a political settlement."⁵⁰ However, the Trump administration was able to achieve in its first term what the Bush and Obama administration were either unable or unwilling to do over two terms each: sign a peace deal with the Taliban.

Officially entitled *Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan*, this three part, four-page document guarantees a timeline of 14 months for the "complete withdrawal of all U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan; a Taliban pledge that Afghan soil will not be used against the security of the United States and its allies; the launch of intra-Afghan negotiations; and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire."⁵¹ As political scientist Barnett Rubin, who has advised both the U.S. State Department and the United Nations on Afghanistan said, "no rational, conventional, predictable U.S. politician would take the risks needed to negotiate seriously with the Taliban."⁵² Moreover, according to International Crisis Group President Robert Malley, who was a senior foreign policy adviser to Obama, "it would have been far preferable if a deal had been reached years ago, when the Taliban were in a weaker position, but it would be far worse if a deal were not reached now, based on the illusory belief that, somehow, the Taliban will be in a weaker position tomorrow."⁵³

There are still worries within think-tanks and analysts that crisis could implode. Many observers anticipate that a "full-scale U.S. withdrawal and/or aid cut-off would lead to the collapse of the Afghan government and perhaps even the reestablishment of Taliban control, a scenario President Trump said possibly will happen."⁵⁴ The question remains whether domestic politics will get in the way of strategy again where a "legitimate, U.N.-mandated winnable mission for peace and democracy, unlike Iraq and Syria, is disregarded for further support."⁵⁵ Likewise, all Americans – "the news media included – need to be prepared to examine the national credulity or passivity

that's led to the longest conflict in modern American history."⁵⁶ It seems Washington has set aside its long-standing insistence that any "substantive negotiations had to include the Afghan government's participation and acceded to the Taliban's demand that an understanding on withdrawal of foreign forces be reached in talks solely with the United States prior to commencement of peace talks among Afghans."⁵⁷ Although any peace agreement in and of itself is a limited vehicle for conflict resolution, an agreement and the process of compromise and consensus building that produces it can set a foundation for peace. Ultimately, the will of the parties to make an agreement stick and to resolve the inevitable disputes over implementation that will arise will determine whether the foundation holds or crumbles. Building on that foundation will require developing a "political system that keeps competition in the nonviolent realm."⁵⁸

Conclusion

Many conditions have changed in Afghanistan over the last two decades, but the basic structural conundrum of the Afghan state has not: "Afghan political elites predominantly insist on a highly centralized system, but a winner-take-all political apparatus, combined with a deeply entrenched patronage-based political culture and with ethnic and tribal identity politics, has produced persistent internal conflict and left Afghanistan vulnerable to external influence."⁵⁹ While President Trump's foreign policy has been unwise if not self-defeating in many areas, he is right, as was Barack Obama, to want to scale back a global conflict that appears to have no outer bound. President Trump's own worldview and his conduct of diplomacy varied from the leaders before him. His overreliance on personal relationships and his unique understanding of diplomatic agreements are reflective of *Groupthink* mentality. The competing voices prevalent under the Obama administration were less prevalent under the Trump administration

that often-made suboptimal decisions as a result of their conscious or subconscious desire for consensus over dissent. Nevertheless, in the case of Afghanistan, the Trump administration was clear in its approach and stymied any opposition to their decision-making unit. Hitherto, the agreement still has many roadblocks in its way, including the speed of which U.S. withdrawal will take place and ensuring Taliban compliance to a cease-fire and intra-Afghan talks. The failure of American leaders – from the Pentagon to the State Department to Congress to the White House – to develop and pursue a strategy to end the war has become redundant. As the United States mulls withdrawal from Afghanistan, recent media coverage has been punctuated with defeatism. It is a stark contrast with the overwhelming optimism of the Afghan people for a future of peace with liberty and dignity, which is achievable with continued international support.

Three presidents – Bush, Obama, and Trump – and their military commanders have been unable to deliver on promises to prevail in Afghanistan. U.S. officials acknowledged that their warfighting strategies were fatally flawed, and that Washington wasted enormous sums of money trying to remake Afghanistan into a modern nation. The Trump administration's signing of the *Agreement to Bring Peace to Afghanistan* is a win for diplomacy. However, it is only the foundation for lasting peace which requires leaders to put aside political considerations and support the Afghan people by concluding the longest conflict in modern American history. The collective trauma felt by the foreign policy community in the wake of the Bush administrations' approach to Afghanistan and Obama's own personal decision-making style and ideology led to a boomerang effect in which different advisors framed the war in a variety of discordant ways, suing accurate but incomplete information to bolster their perspectives. While the military viewed the Afghanistan War as an important, and very public, display of America's military power, members

of the State Department viewed the war as a potential drag on diplomatic overtures to other predominantly Muslim countries that resented their involvement. Thus, decisions were constrained by the menu of choices presented which were a product of bureaucratic politics. In sum, the institutional lens through which the Afghanistan War was seen was a critical factor that divided the decision-making unit. This lens increased *Polythink* and inhibited consensus and cooperation on one overarching policy objective. Now it's up to President Trump's administration and the Taliban to ensure the agreement is respected. The success of this agreement and the need for continued international support rests on the back of every Afghan – envisioning an Afghanistan that binds peace and unity together after nearly two-decades plagued by violence, division, corruption and lies.

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