

## Learning from Failure: Afghanistan as a Microcosm for Strategic Competition

### Description

Why should the U.S. military and political leadership care about Afghanistan? Isn't Afghanistan a story about sunk costs whose lessons only apply to counter terrorism or counter insurgency? Absolutely not. Rather, the U.S. military must understand its failures in Afghanistan to succeed in strategic competition. Failure to learn and adapt could end in similar disaster with greater strategic consequences.

In 2020, the world watched as the U.S. military scrambled to the exits while the Afghan government and military imploded, leaving the country in shambles. Credible analysis calls the war in Afghanistan an [unmitigated strategic failure](#) that demands accountability. Conveniently, the U.S. leadership have plenty to distract from failure in Afghanistan due to crisis in Israel, conflict in Ukraine, potential war over Taiwan, and the dominance of strategic competition with China, Russia, and Iran, not to mention the ever-simmering crisis with North Korea. The U.S. military has now shifted priorities to strategic competition and confronting and deterring the [pace threat](#). Unfortunately, the ghost of Afghanistan will not go away that easily. Not only will Afghanistan continue to matter due to residual terrorist safe havens, but strategic competition also harkens back to the [Cold War](#) where competition played out over irregular conflicts in Afghanistan, El Salvador, Vietnam, and elsewhere. Strategic competition, in fact, possesses numerous parallels with the multi-decade U.S. conflict in Afghanistan. This article posits that Afghanistan represents a microcosm for strategic competition and that the U.S. military's success in this competition requires learning from failure in Afghanistan. Most centrally, the U.S. military failed to effectively wage a political warfare campaign in Afghanistan. To better enable future success, the military needs to apply analysis-based [political warfare](#) frameworks, employ hybrid methods to support political-military objectives, and adapt legacy manpower and deployment models. Left unlearned, military leaders and practitioners will continue to repeat similar mistakes across ongoing irregular battlefields in strategic competition.

### U.S. Failure to Compete in Afghanistan

The U.S. military principally [failed](#) in Afghanistan by not adequately addressing the centrality of layered multi-polar political competition and conflict. Rather than waging a political warfare campaign, the U.S. military basically approached Afghanistan through [traditional battlefield combat](#). This approach defaulted to U.S. unilateral combat operations to find, fix, and finish enemy forces, often whom the U.S.

forces could not meaningfully [differentiate](#) between the Taliban, Haqqani network, al Qaeda, a local warlord, or local militia. Short-term rotational unit deployments, typically with limited or no prior experience in their area of operations, incentivized a focus on combat operations and de-incentivized understanding the power landscape. When the U.S. military engaged local and regional powerbrokers, short term deployments and lack of contextual knowledge and misemployment of hybrid warfare often destabilized the economic landscape or enabled local Afghani local, regional, or national powerbrokers to [extort and manipulate](#) the U.S. military thereby neutralizing the desired effect and design of U.S. programs. The military's rotational deployment model proved particularly debilitating as it systematically rotated units and leaders in an ad hoc manner, effectively neutralizing continuity of relationships, understanding, or operational approaches. Ultimately, the U.S. military failed to employ an appropriate tactical and operational political warfare approach in Afghanistan and proved ineffective in engaging in tactical and operational competition while leveraging combat capability to support competitive objectives.

The U.S. war in Afghanistan offers a microcosm of current strategic competition due to multi-polar competition and conflict occurring simultaneously across the local, regional, and global theaters. In Afghanistan, the U.S. political and military leadership violated [Clausewitz's first principle of war](#) through not recognizing the type of war it encountered. While the U.S. military viewed the conflict through a bipolar lens of al Qaeda unified with the Taliban against the U.S. and unified resistance partners, reality shows a [kaleidoscopic](#) spectrum of complex actors. Locally, these actors often included isolated village elders, connected through tribal and ethnic ties but dissociated from a centralized Kabul state structure. At the regional level, competition occurred across Pakistan, India, Iran, the U.S., Russia, China, and others, while globally al Qaeda, the U.S., China, Iran, UN, UK and others engaged in complex confrontation over Afghanistan and its future. This multipolar competition and conflict occurred simultaneously, creating complex adaptation with cascading subsequent effects locally, regionally, and globally. The U.S. military proved largely incapable of [understanding or addressing the challenge](#). Just as troubling, many units naively applied doctrinal counterinsurgency methods generically or with little analysis of *why* or *how* to apply the methods. Finally, many military tactical and operational leaders [did not practically consider a political warfare campaign part of their job](#) or at least [did not effectively implement an effective campaign](#). Instead, the military preferred to advocate for [U.S. Department of State responsibility](#) while pursuing attritional combat operations themselves. Unfortunately, [little to no Department of State presence existed outside of Kabul](#), nor did a recognizable approach exist to connect or federate governance across Afghanistan. The result proved telling both analytically and experientially for those who served across Afghanistan: the U.S. led by its military failed to effectively compete, substituting temporary and clumsy combat power instead of sustainable Afghan political power. In the end, the Taliban prevailed as the remaining sustainable Afghan political power.

## Afghanistan, a Microcosm of Strategic Competition for Power

The U.S. conflict in Afghanistan reveals at least five critical parallels to global strategic competition with Russia, China, and Iran including multi-polarity, multi-layered conflict, ambiguous objectives, hybrid warfare methods, and indecisive combat. The conflict in Afghanistan and ongoing strategic competition both include multi-polar competition among a wide range of actors. As noted, in Afghanistan, the U.S. military faced a [plethora](#) of political and military actors and adversaries, including al Qaeda, the Taliban, Pakistan, Iran, local warlords, the government of Afghanistan, China, India, and others. Similarly, the U.S. faces a [multi-polar strategic adversarial environment](#) including China, Russia, Iran, North Korea as well as a diverse array of non-state actors and proxies such as Wagner Group, Transregional Criminal Organizations, and local and global terrorist organizations.

The U.S. faces multiple layers of competition and conflict in complex-adaptive multi-polar environments in Afghanistan and global competition. In Afghanistan, the U.S. military encountered complex village, or local, level competition and conflict with [accidental guerillas](#), local tribal elders, ethno-centric warlords, and insurgent networks. Simultaneously, it encountered [regional competition and conflict](#) with the Taliban, Iran, Pakistan, and India. Globally, the U.S. military faced global conflict and competition with al Qaeda, ISIS, China, Iran, and Russia. Together, this created a complex-adaptive multi-polar and layered competitive environment. Similarly, the U.S. currently faces complex-adaptive multi-layered competition and conflict with its strategic competitors locally, regionally, and globally. In Iraq and Syria, it simultaneously faces Russian and Iranian threat network alignment all the while confronting ISIS and operating in politically competitive environments between Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish government and non-governmental factions. In the Philippines, the U.S. military simultaneously faces [ISIS affiliates](#) and [PRC encroachment and coercion](#) in Philippine territorial waters. In Europe, the U.S. confronts Russian incursions into [Ukraine](#) through supplying money, weapons, and equipment to Ukrainians battling Russian regular and irregular forces at the local, regional, and international levels. Modern [information technology](#) has only served to increase the [complex interaction](#) between these local, regional, and global layers.

Multi-polarity across all layers of competition and conflict in Afghanistan and strategic competition have produced ambiguous strategic political objectives. In Afghanistan, this complex-dynamic environment confounded U.S. political objectives. What began as retaliation for the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> to destroy al Qaeda and neutralize terrorist safe havens [morphed](#) into democratic nation building and expanding the rights of individual Afghans. Later, when decisive success proved elusive, objectives focused on strengthening the Afghan security forces, neutralizing remaining terrorist networks, and looking for an exit strategy. Finally, the U.S. accepted withdrawal as the metric of success at the expense of earlier objectives. Throughout the conflict, the U.S. faithfully followed a [centralized](#)

government model and political strategy regardless of realities on the ground at the village, district, provincial, national, or regional levels.

Similarly, the U.S. faces political ambiguity in global competition with China, Russia, and Iran. While at the global level, U.S. political objectives may appear relatively simple, at the regional and local levels, multi-polar and layered competition creates [complexity and muddles](#) political objectives. For example, competition with the PRC in the Western Pacific balances U.S. national security objectives with regional allies and partners such as Australia, Japan, and others while meshing those interests with local allies and partners in the Philippines, Indonesia, India, and elsewhere. The meshing of complex global, regional, and local interests produces ambiguity and sometimes [conflicting objectives](#). Local interests to prevent escalation, conflict, and backlash within Russia's and China's spheres of influence exacerbate political ambiguity and prevent clarity, which can [conflict with a local country's political interests](#). The result has produced complexity unparalleled since at least the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Cold War. On its face, the United States is employing a simple strategy, [Integrated deterrence](#), a framework for working across warfighting domains, theaters, and the spectrum of conflict, in collaboration with all instruments of national power, as well as with U.S. allies and our partners. A closer examination reveals, however, much greater ambiguity. While objectives with close allies such as the U.K., Australia, and Japan are clear, an attentive look at partnership with [balancers](#) such as India, Indonesia, Iraq, Germany, and others illuminate oft-time precarious political objectives where U.S. approaches to ensuring advantage are [tailored considerably](#) due to the unique actors and equities at stake. Ultimately, conflict in Afghanistan and strategic competition both reveal ambiguous political objectives due to the diverse range of actors and layers of complexity at local, regional, and global levels. The battlefield for this competition for power, resources, and influence extends globally, including less considered countries such as Papua New Guinea, Georgia, Finland, the Philippines, as well as the obvious flashpoints in Ukraine, Syria, and Taiwan. Like Afghanistan, the complexity has defied simple political objectives, instead requiring tailored goals with the various countries involved.

Multi-polarity, complex layers, and political ambiguity have perpetuated hybrid warfare and indecisive combat in both Afghanistan and strategic competition. While the United States began its war in Afghanistan to retaliate against al Qaeda and deny future terrorist safe havens, it quickly expanded its objectives to revolutionary democratic state building. It did so at the national, regional, and international levels while the local and district levels of government remained virtually divorced from centralized control or support from Kabul. Tactically, while combat remained pervasive, the U.S. military turned to hybrid methods based on counter insurgency doctrine. These methods included tactical level leadership engagements to influence local leaders, often using carrots of economic assistance through humanitarian related projects such as wells, schools, and other work programs designed to encourage

cooperation from the local populace. All the while, military operations, often with a pro forma Afghan face, executed essentially [U.S. military led](#) combat operations to find, fix, and destroy insurgent networks. Although pervasive, combat in Afghanistan proved indecisive, although likely producing one of the highest friendly to [enemy force killed ratios](#) in history. It ultimately, however, never eradicated the enemy nor enabled the political and military strategy set by U.S. leadership.

As outlined by authors Seth Jones in [“Three Dangerous Men”](#) and David Kilcullen in [“The Dragons and the Snakes”](#), strategic competitors have predominately employed indirect hybrid warfare and competitive methods to confront the United States. China has led with the most indirect method, using a [“win without fighting”](#) methodology epitomizing [“Unrestricted Warfare”](#) through hybrid legal, psychological, media, and economic means. Russia has proven more militarily aggressive, through cyber enabled psychological operations, proxy and direct military assistance in Syria and Africa, and direct conflict in Ukraine. Iran, meanwhile, maintains a robust proxy threat network throughout the Middle East and the world to contest U.S. and allied interests while bolstering its own global position. In strategic competition, where the aim is to sustain advantage while preventing direct conflict, direct combat will continue to serve a key but likely supporting and indirect role. The U.S. security assistance to Ukraine, Taiwan, the Philippines, Poland, Finland, and others represents the primary way that combat assistance will occur. This should not surprise, since the same trend occurred in the [Cold War](#) where direct combat occurred through proxies and surrogates in Afghanistan, Vietnam, Korea, El Salvador, and elsewhere. Furthermore, where direct combat is employed by the U.S., it will most likely occur in stabilizing a local country such as Iraq to deter greater influence from Iran or supporting Ukraine to prevent Russian dominance and future aggression.

### **How to Adapt:**

The U.S. military needs to adapt from its failures in Afghanistan in three primary ways to better support and conduct strategic competition with China, Russia, and Iran. First, the U.S. military should focus campaigning on power-based warfare. A [plethora of articles](#) have debated what irregular warfare is, how to define it, and how to wage it. Most centrally, however, irregular warfare is closely linked to political warfare – the struggle and competition for power where combat operations are one of many hybrid methods to reach U.S. objectives. Authors David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks potentially provide the most effective [definition of irregular warfare](#) that captures its political essence;

“Irregular warfare is a coercive struggle that erodes or builds legitimacy for the purpose of political power. It blends disparate lines of effort to create an integrated attack on societies and their political institutions. It weaponizes frames and narratives to affect credibility and resolve, and it exploits societal vulnerabilities to fuel political change. As such, states engaged in, or confronted with, irregular warfare must bring all elements of power to bear under their national political leadership.”

This definition links closely to analysis of [political warfare](#).

“Political warfare consists of the intentional use of one or more of the implements of power—diplomatic/political, information/cyber, military/intelligence, and economic—to affect the political composition or decision making in a state [or non-state group].”

The U.S. military should develop a historical and current framework of the [power landscape](#) globally and when deploying to a regional and local area of operation. This landscape should consist of a network analysis of relative power and must extend past the central government and out to the edges where governance is often localized and disconnected. From that landscape, the military can integrate appropriate U.S. government agencies and local and central power brokers to craft realistic and minimally acceptable political strategies aligned to U.S. objectives. Second, in support of that engagement framework, the U.S. military should pursue a hybrid warfare approach that mixes and matches methods to reach its objectives whether bolstering governmental resilience or a resistance group. In destabilized areas, U.S. forces may use combat operations or advise and assist a local partner in combat operations. Environments like Afghanistan or similar destabilized areas like Somalia, Ukraine, and others require combat operations to reach U.S. and allied objectives. These combat operations, however, must closely [link to and support](#) the political framework and integrate economic, legal, influence, and other methods to overarching theater and strategic objectives. Third and finally, the U.S. military must break outdated industrial, manpower, and deployment models to design its force to wage irregular strategic competition. Arguably its most important adaptation and most difficult to implement given organizational impediments, the military’s manpower model and short-term deployment cycles create incentives that degrade application of the first two recommendations. The manpower model incentives short-term thinking and focus on superficial issues rather than developing the deep critical thinking, analysis, and adaptive approaches required to succeed. In Afghanistan, this flaw is [best captured](#) by General McChrystal when he asked:

“What would you do differently if you had to stay until we won?”

The answer was to get the right people into the fight, keep them there long enough to develop an understanding of the environment, and hold them accountable for progress, but that was not something the military was interested in doing. Instead, we stuck with a policy that rotated leaders through the country like tourists.”

Success in irregular warfare and strategic competition requires tailoring manpower and deployment models to understand and solve the challenges inherent in complex adaptive threat environments.

## Conclusion

Afghanistan and its lessons matter because the U.S. military ultimately lost several thousand lives, expended trillions of dollars, and failed to achieve its primary strategic objectives by not understanding and conducting layered multi-polar competition and conflict. The U.S. military has been quick to rush away from Afghanistan and to claim that strategic competition is [very different](#) than its experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. This article questions that basic assumption and highlights several critical parallels to consider. Similar to the Cold War, strategic competition is playing out across irregular warfare environments around the globe.

However, while Afghanistan offers a microcosm of strategic competition and the U.S. military should adapt from its mistakes, it must also not rush to apply lessons particular to Afghanistan in other unique contexts. Adapting lessons from Afghanistan to competition with China, Russia, and Iran requires careful application. The U.S. military can begin careful application through producing power frameworks for specific theaters of operation with realistic political-military objectives, employing hybrid methods to support those objectives, and adapting its manpower and deployment models to wage political warfare. Failure to adapt risks the same consequences as faced in Afghanistan and worse. Where the U.S. faces embarrassment, sunk costs, continued threats from transregional terrorism, and degraded credibility from Afghanistan, future failures in Ukraine, Central and Eastern Africa, the South China Sea, and elsewhere could result in conflict escalation, global economic crisis, or total warfare. While the U.S. military is not the lead for strategic competition, it will continue to lead where the operational environment is destabilized and requires security capabilities not available elsewhere, namely irregular warfare environments that [blur peace and war](#). [Overwhelmingly the most prevalent form of warfare](#) since at least 1945, irregular political warfare with strategic competitors will continue to force U.S. military intervention around the globe. The U.S. military, therefore, must learn and adapt to avoid future catastrophe.

*Paul Bailey is an active-duty U.S. Marine with more than 16 years of conventional and special operations experience across the Middle East and Western Pacific. In 2023, he was selected as a Non-Resident Fellow for the [Irregular Warfare Initiative](#).*

*The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official position of the United States Military Academy, Department of the Army, or Department of Defense.*

*Main image: U.S. Air Force loadmasters and pilots assigned to the 816th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron, load passengers aboard a U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III in support of the Afghanistan evacuation at Hamid Karzai International Airport (HKIA), Afghanistan, Aug. 24, 2021 (Master Sgt. Donald R. Allen via U.S. Air Force).*

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