

2022

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Recommended Citation

Chavez, Y. E. (2022). The counterterrorist myopia in Afghanistan. *International Journal of Security Studies & Practice*, 2(1), Article 5. <http://ijssp.ung.edu>

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The author declares that there is no potential conflict of interest related to the article.

The Counterterrorist Myopia in Afghanistan

Counterterrorist myopia is the condition suffered by counterterrorist strategists and operatives who try desperately to combat terrorism by using short-term solutions, such as the use of foreign military forces and extrajudicial punishment without considering their long-term effects. It makes them perceive a blurry picture of the reality, actors, solutions, and consequences. Those who suffer from counterterrorist myopia can take increasingly desperate measures in correlation with even more negative conditions. As a result, the current counterterrorist strategies have suffered from inaccurate perceptions, misinterpretation of the culture, headaches because of deficient intelligence, and unawareness of other big international players.

Like literal myopia in human beings, this kind of myopia gave counterterrorist strategists in Afghanistan a blurred vision of the reality there. It should be highlighted that while the international coalition perceived the Taliban as terrorists, the Taliban were fighting for their motherland to be respected. Similarly, during the Algerian War, counterterrorist strategists did not understand that the Algerians were fighting for their independence, which, in turn, made the French treat desperately many Algerians like terrorists. In doing so, the French army approved extreme methods to eradicate terrorism such as torture and forced disappearance without any judicial trial.

The same mistake of perception happened during the Vietnam War. While the Americans perceived the North Vietnamese as tools of communist expansionism in South Asia, the North Vietnamese perceived the Americans and the French as colonizers. With their country having been a colony of France for almost a century, the North Vietnamese perceived the military intervention by the United States of America as another form of colonialism. Nonetheless, because the Americans considered the Viet Cong terrorists, the military supposedly committed several reproachable actions during the 1968 Operation Speedy Express, during which it was alleged more

than 5,000 civilians were killed, and the infamous My Lai massacre in 1968, during which more than 300 civilians were also killed (Turse, 2008).

The situation in Afghanistan was much the same. After fighting against the Soviet Union's invasion for nine years, the people of Afghanistan considered the American intervention as new invasion. Given their blurry vision, the counterterrorist operatives on the ground did not know how to properly handle the military operations. Examples of this were the Dasht-i-Leili massacre in 2001, the Bagram torture in 2002, and the Kandahar massacre in 2012 (BBC News, 2012; Lindh, 2021). As a result, the Taliban easily galvanized a national sentiment of liberation, which proved to be successful when the American military withdrew from Afghanistan after 20 years of military operations.

Another important symptom of this kind of myopia was the misinterpretation of the culture. Although the international coalition wanted to rapidly transform the culture in Afghanistan, the culture as part of the national identity should be respected. There are many parts of Western culture that could not be easily accepted in Eastern culture such as the political system, dress code, education, and women's rights. The problem was that rapid changes in the culture of Afghanistan were perceived as foreign impositions and signs of disrespect of Eastern values. For instance, during the Afghanistan War, the international coalition did not understand the value and importance of Sharia law, which has been successfully operating in Afghanistan for centuries. As a result, the international community portrayed the Taliban as lawless cavemen.

On the contrary, Sharia law is an integral part of the tradition in many countries and societies in the Eastern world. It should be noted that while counterterrorist strategists accepted and respected the application of the Sharia law in many other such countries, they wanted to rapidly change enduring traditions in Afghanistan.

Additionally, counterterrorist strategists did not allow Afghanistan's people to choose the kind of political system they wanted. In other words, the international coalition wanted to impose a particular political model in Afghanistan, though it accepted different types of governments around the world. Although counterterrorist strategists had good intentions, legitimacy and stability are more important for governments and societies than imported political models. It should be recognized that democratic political systems can achieve legitimacy; however, authoritarian and monarchical governments can also be legitimate. Consequently, if the Taliban can work with a political system based on their traditional leadership council, they will surely achieve stability and legitimacy.

It should be noted that it was a mistake to forget the power of the traditional tribal political organization in Afghanistan, which has lasted for centuries. Sadly, counterterrorist strategists wanted to achieve short-sighted political solutions without considering the power of traditions. They did not understand that evolution in political systems can take time and patience. Even the most efficient democracies in the world can experience some flaws in their leadership. For example, the U.S. president Franklin Delano Roosevelt broke the tradition of serving only two times as president with the intention to govern the United States of America for 16 years through the election process (History.com, 2009).

It was necessary to amend the American political constitution to prevent that situation in the future. Likewise, Park Chung-hee governed South Korea for 18 years and Lee Kuan Yew ruled Singapore for 25 years (Kirk, 2015). Although they can be categorized as authoritarian, they laid the foundations that have made South Korea and Singapore into successful economic models. As a result, culture and traditions matter when it comes to designing legitimate political systems that can support counterterrorist strategies with long-term effects.

Counterterrorist myopia also led the international coalition to develop faulty intelligence. For instance, the intelligence community did not forecast how fast the security forces would fall once the international coalition withdrew from Afghanistan. The international coalition made the wrong assumption that the number of planes, tanks, and military personnel was more important than how the country perceived its military forces to be worthy of respect and legitimacy. As noted in the cases of the Algerian War, the Vietnam War, the Soviet-Afghan War, and the Afghanistan War, mighty military forces can be defeated when intelligence analysts make faulty estimations based mainly on military power. In reality, once the foreign military abandons a country, the weakened local military forces will fall very fast.

Likewise, the intelligence community made tragic mistakes when conducting airstrikes that unintentionally killed civilians. Unfortunately, that kind of mistake created anger and distrust in the population. It should be noted that there are different estimates of how many civilians have died during airstrikes in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2020. For example, while some say that more than 4,000 civilians were killed, other scholars claim that only 300 civilians died (Fadel et al., 2021; Piper & Dyke, 2021). The huge difference in numbers makes it difficult to determine how many civilians have died in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, faulty intelligence created deep resentment because of the lack of accountability when deaths occurred due to airstrikes. For instance, in November 2021, faulty intelligence led the American military to conduct a drone strike in Kabul, Afghanistan that killed 10 civilians, most of them children (BBC News, 2021). For the American counterterrorist strategists, that drone strike was a military operation against three Islamic State (ISIS) operatives, though it was later discovered that 10 innocent persons had been killed. However, for the people of Afghanistan, it was the unjustified killing of innocent people. Likewise, there were

controversies related to the legality of that strike. Despite this consideration, this drone strike was a mistake for the American military. As noted, counterterrorist myopia can make strategists see a highly distorted vision of the reality on the ground.

Moreover, faulty intelligence is even more evident when counterterrorist strategists consider Afghanistan as a fertile ground for terrorism. Although it is possible that ISIS could randomly operate in some parts of Afghanistan, the intelligence community should understand that ISIS is a terrorist trademark or brand that many criminal groups are going to spontaneously use to promote themselves, gain prestige, and impose fear not only in Afghanistan but in different parts of the world. In that regard, the intelligence community made wrong assessments about the rapid evolution of terrorism, which made them have myopic tunnel vision.

It is worth noting that when Osama bin Laden founded Al-Qaeda, he did so with the intention of establishing a base where future terrorists could be trained to conduct attacks around the world. As a matter of fact, Al-Qaeda means “the base.” Consequently, if someone wanted to be a terrorist, they needed to travel to a remote training base where key persons could receive a deep indoctrination, training, knowledge transfer, and above all, the approval of Al-Qaeda leaders.

ISIS changed that old-fashioned concept and revolutionized the use of technology and social media for its benefit. Although ISIS members’ interest was to eventually form a state or caliphate, their primary goal was to massively expand their influence around the world, to everybody. As a result, it was not necessary to travel to a secret training camp to learn how to conduct terrorist attacks. The absence of physical training camps would make it extremely difficult to detect how and when a group is going to conduct a terrorist attack. For instance, from 2013 to 2020, there were at least seven terrorist attacks in the United States of America, 12 attacks in France, five attacks in the United Kingdom and 16 attacks linked to ISIS (Lister et al., 2018). As

a result, the assumption that Afghanistan is going to be a fertile ground for terrorist groups should be extended to many countries.

While the international coalition decided to withdraw from Afghanistan, other regional powers have acknowledged that now is the right time to fill the power vacuum. Of note, Western countries have delayed the recognition of the Taliban as legitimate political leaders, but Russia, China, and Pakistan are trying to help the Taliban form a more inclusive government and achieve enduring stability. For example, those countries have maintained their embassies in Kabul. In that regard, they have understood the importance of Afghanistan to expand their influence in Asia. Moreover, for Russia, China, and Pakistan it is the right moment to expand commercial relationships with the Taliban.

Afghanistan, a country of almost 38 million people, represents a huge market to create mutual commercial benefits. Consequently, the international community should establish diplomatic relationships with the Taliban government in Afghanistan, expand economic relations, give economic aids without imposing conditions, and offer expert advisory. Sadly, because counterterrorist strategists consider the Taliban terrorists, they do not advocate for the benefits of establishing diplomatic and economic relations with the Taliban.

Consequently, the international community should detect symptoms of counterterrorist myopia and implement corrective measures not only in Afghanistan but in different parts of the world. The first set of corrective measures is the use of legitimate local military forces and the withdrawal of foreign combating military forces. In this regard, foreign military help is acceptable only in a supporting role. Examples of this can be financial support, intelligence support, donations of equipment, and training. Sadly, one symptom of counterterrorist myopia is the use of foreign military forces in another country. The problem with this is that foreign military forces can be

perceived as colonizers, which can trigger negative explosive chain reactions. An example of this mistake is the current French military forces conducting counterterrorist operations in Mali, which was a former French colony. Other examples are the use of Indian military forces to fight the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka in 1989, the use of American and French military forces during the First and Second Indochina Wars.

The second set of corrective measures is the application of the rule of law. In that regard, strategists always must look for the expedient judicialization of terrorist acts and the formation of legitimate judicial tribunals. Examples of the successful use of these measures were the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal and the Nuremberg Trial, which allowed the judicial prosecution of criminals and the restoration of peace in Japan and Germany after World War II. It should be noted that the application of a legitimate rule of law laid the foundation to transform Japan and Germany into prosperous world-class economies. Given the fact that terrorism is essentially a crime, every act of terrorism should be treated by a legitimate judicial tribunal.

Wrongfully, the use of extrajudicial punishment is a symptom of severe counterterrorist myopia. Extrajudicial punishment can include the use of torture in any form, indefinite detention, violation of human rights, extrajudicial killings, and forced disappearance. For instance, it has been suggested that, by 2002, almost 30 percent of Guantanamo Base detainees were Afghans (Haddad, 2021). Even today, there are still Afghan detainees in Guantanamo. These kinds of punishments only caused deep resentment in the population, massive recruitment for new terrorists, and destruction of any intention of surrender to government authorities.

During the Afghanistan War in 2001, the United States refused to negotiate the surrender of the Taliban leaders (Goodkind, 2021). This decision was quite different from what happened during World War II when the Allied Forces accepted the surrender of Japanese leaders despite

their attack on Pearl Harbor Naval Base that caused more than 3,000 casualties and their bloody way of war.

In summary, when strategists and operatives suffer from counterterrorist myopia, they cannot not see a clear picture of the past and the present. As a result, it is difficult for them to understand the reality. For them, it is even more difficult to extract lessons from the past, design proper strategies, and look into the future. This condition is very problematic because it means counterterrorist strategists have short-range vision, which makes them accept easy solutions for present problems despite those solutions' consequences for the future. Consequently, those who suffer from counterterrorist myopia experience inaccurate perceptions, misinterpretation of the culture, headaches because of deficient intelligence, and unawareness of other big international players. Therefore, it is time to detect and cure the counterterrorist myopia to improve counterterrorist strategy.

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