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# **Building the State?**

**Security Sector Reform in Afghanistan between  
2001 and 2021**

## Building the State? Security Sector Reform in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021

### Introduction

The fall of Kabul to the Afghan Taliban in August 2021 brought an end to the US-backed government of Ashraf Ghani and ended the twenty years of non-Taliban rule that had begun following the American-led invasion of the country in October 2001. Although the Afghan State and its institutions were generally considered as fragile at best even prior to the Taliban's victory, the Taliban takeover took place more quickly than most international observers, including the United States' government, considered possible (Worsnop, 2021). In a speech in late August 2021, following the withdrawal of the last American troops from Afghanistan, US President Joe Biden found a ready scapegoat on which to blame to the Taliban's unexpectedly quick victory: the Afghan military. Biden (2021) defended his decision to withdraw US troops by the 31st of August with the assumption that *"more than 300,000 Afghan National Security Forces that we had trained over the past two decades and equipped would be a strong adversary in their civil wars with the Taliban"*. The President (ibid) conceded that the presumption that *"the Afghan government would be able to hold on for a period of time beyond military drawdown"* *"turned out not to be accurate"* as the Afghan forces *"did not hold on as long as anyone expected"*.

The President's comments drew widespread criticism from both US and non-US actors and were widely interpreted as seeking to shift responsibility away from the US and Washington's decision to end its military presence in the country. Ben Sasse, a Republican Senator from Nebraska, lamented that *"while President Joe Biden cowers at Camp David, the Taliban are humiliating America"* (quoted in McKelvey & Deng, 2021). The withdrawal and the comments also evoked criticism from the US' transatlantic partners, with Norbert Röttgen, chairman of the German parliament's foreign relations committee, contending that *"the early withdrawal was a serious and far-reaching miscalculation by the current administration"* that *"does fundamental damage to the political and moral credibility of the West"* (quoted in Karnitschnig, 2021). The withdrawal of American troops from Kabul, famously captured in the picture of the departure of a US helicopter from the roof of the American embassy in Kabul just as the Taliban entered the city, indeed appeared eerily reminiscent to the chaotic American withdrawal from Saigon in 1975. Once again, the American-led attempt to install a democracy in a non-Western country had failed in a spectacular manner.

Although the timing of Biden's statements is unfortunate at best and highly problematic at worst, the substance of the President's speech warrants some further attention. Military aid to Afghanistan was one of the main avenues through which international aid was delivered between 2001 and 2021: according to a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Washington alone spent \$73 billion on the training and equipment of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in that time period (Tian, 2021), accounting for 60% of all US-provided aid (Yasa, 2020). Additionally, the ANSF received more than three billion US\$ from the NATO-funded Afghan National Army Trust Fund that was designed to facilitate and

enhance the cooperation between ANSF and ISAF (NATO, 2021). ISAF, short for International Security Assistance Force, had been established by the UN Security Council in December 2001 and remained active until 2014 (NATO, 2021). During the US-led presence in Afghanistan, the reform of the Afghan security sector had evidently been a strategic priority of the various donor parties involved in rebuilding Afghanistan. Yet, the rapid advance of the Taliban from May 2021 onwards indicates that the ultimate goal of Security Sector Reform (SSR) in Afghanistan, namely the creation of a capable ANSF that could hold its ground against the Taliban, was not attained.

This article explores why SSR in Afghanistan after 2001 failed, with this failure being a key factor enabling the Taliban takeover of effectively all of the country in August 2021. The article suggests that the SSR approach employed by various donors was marred by insufficient coordination, resource misallocation, corruption, and an underdevelopment of the political legitimacy of both the ANSF and the US/ISAF-backed Afghan government more generally. The ultimate failure of SSR in Afghanistan consequently reflects and embodies the broader strategic shortcomings of the international alliance in Afghanistan.

The paper is structured as follows: it firstly conceptualizes SSR as a practical policy framework with specific political assumptions before examining how SSR played out in Afghanistan. The shortcomings of SSR, it concludes, maintained political instability in the country and enabled the re-emergence of the Taliban as a key political grouping in Afghanistan.

### **SSR as a policy framework**

The concept of SSR is a policy framework that is inherently linked to the liberal peacebuilding agenda that became pervasive among Western donor countries following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The USSR's dissolution shifted the perceived source of international insecurity: as the threat of nuclear conflict with the communist bloc dissipated, threats to national, regional, and international insecurity increasingly seemed to be either the result of conflicts within countries or conflicts between countries that were seemingly initiated by authoritarian leaders, with the first Gulf War serving as a prime example. The fallout of post-Cold War conflicts often appeared to be characterized by governmental corruption and/or governmental breakdown that ultimately enabled political insecurity in places such as Iraq and Somalia. In some instances, most notably in Iraq and the Balkans, the government's security sector (meaning its police, military, paramilitary, and intelligence community) became directly involved in perpetrating violence against its own and foreign populations. Crucially, the dissolution of the USSR meant that conflicts in the immediate post-Cold War order were no longer seen through the prism of Cold War geopolitics but as the result of structural conditions that worked to undermine the peaceful existence of countries and societies.

This interpretation of international (in)security dynamics gave rise to a dogma that focused on the building of a 'liberal peace' in societies, which partially included the (re-)building of State structures. This peacebuilding and State-building intent was heavily influenced by the role of the United States, which conceptualized a lack of economic

development as a key facet causing national, regional, and ultimately international security (Ball, 2010). An underdeveloped economy and corrupt political structures, the narrative went, would fuel political insecurity and vice versa. This specific understanding of the causes of international (in)security tied this development agenda to the notion of human security, which removed interpretations of security from the State and military-centric focus of the Cold War and instead focused on the security of individuals and communities (Liotta & Owen, 2006). The development and security agenda that evolved in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War thus focused on both socioeconomic development and human security, creating a framework through which political interventions in (post-)conflict environments would be approached.

SSR became a key component of the international, heavily US-influenced security and intervention agenda. The growing influence of the notion of human security resulted in the security and military apparatuses of developing countries increasingly being seen as the source of insecurity, not the solution to insecurity (Hendrickson & Karkoszka, 2002). A dysfunctional security sector, especially in failing or failed States, was viewed as potentially exacerbating the human insecurity in the country and region, meaning that this sector too had to be revamped in order to create lasting peace (Jackson, 2012). In practice, this elevated the reform of inefficient, corrupt, and brutal security forces to constitute a pivotal part of the peacebuilding agenda (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2006). The discourse surrounding SSR thus became inextricably linked to ideas surrounding liberal peacebuilding. Alongside SSR, other key tenets of liberal peacebuilding that were believed to sustainably pacify a society were the establishment of more neoliberal economic structures and a democratic political system, indicating how heavily this agenda was shaped by a Western-centric understanding of peace, stability, and conflict (Karlsrud, 2019).

It is notable that SSR does not have a clear definition as different SSR donors employ different interpretations of what reforming a country's security sector entails. The United Nations' Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2151, adopted by the UNSC in 2014, stipulates that SSR initiatives must,

*“aim to enhance the governance and overall performance of the security sector and address the foundations upon which security institutions in each component area are built, such as through support to national security dialogues; national security sector reviews and mappings; national security policy and strategy; national security legislation; national security sector plans; security sector public expenditure reviews; and national security oversight, management and coordination”* (p. 4).

In contrast, the EU employs a more human-centric definition of SSR. For the EU (n.d), SSR aims to,

*“ensure the security of individuals, as perceived and experienced by them. This involves upholding their fundamental freedoms and properly assessing, in a participatory way, the security needs of different groups, including the most vulnerable. The system should address the specific needs of women, minors, the elderly and minorities.”*

In general, SSR aims to enhance the operational capacities of security forces in (post-)conflict environments to ultimately foster a more peaceful and liveable environment for the citizens of that country.

The partial complicity of administrative structures in the violence perpetrated by the security sector also means that institutional reforms are a key component of SSR programmes and the liberal peacebuilding agenda. The (re-)construction of political institutions along the lines of institutions present in the West reasserts the Western-centric character of the liberal peace concept. The establishment of Western-style democracy is a key component of this: the connection between the security sector and civil society ought to be strengthened by creating increased accountability through democratic institutions. In a policy brief, the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (n.d.a) suggests that

*“SSR is the political and technical process of improving state and human security by making security provision, management and oversight more effective and more accountable, within a framework of democratic civilian control, rule of law and respect for human rights. The goal of SSR is to apply the principles of good governance to the security sector”* (p. 1)

SSR here becomes linked to heavily Western-influenced understandings of ‘good governance’ through the concept of Security Sector Governance (SSG). The same brief defines SSG as the following:

*“Good SSG describes how the principles of good governance apply to security provision, management and oversight by state and nonstate actors. The principles of good governance are accountability, transparency, rule of law, participation, responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency. Good SSG means that the security sector provides state and human security, effectively and accountably, within a framework of democratic civilian control, rule of law and respect for human rights. Good SSG is a specific type of security governance based on a normative standard for how the state security sector should work in a democracy.”* (p. 2)

Another report by the same organization (n.d.) creates a clear operationalization for what successfully achieved SSG through SSR looks like:

- Security forces can provide security comprehensively and at a reasonable cost
- The security sector is inclusive and represents the countries’ diversity
- The security sector is transparent and provides information to the public
- The security sector is accountable to public-civilian authorities
- The security sector is safeguarded by a legal and judicial framework
- The security sector is monitored independent by the public and civil society organizations
- Domestic security forces can smoothly operate with one another

It is notable that SSR constitutes one part of a broader understanding of how societies should ideally function. SSR, in other words, is insufficient to sustainably stabilize a country and must

be accompanied by broader, overarching institutional and social reforms. Wulf (2004, p. 5) consequently views SSR to have four key dimensions:

- The political dimension: SSR is transparent and takes place under civil control
- The economic dimension: SSR takes place through an appropriate consumption of the available resources
- The social dimension: SSR guarantees the provision of physical security to the country's citizens
- The institutional dimension: SSR entails the professionalization of actors in the security sector

In sum, SSR is a multi-dimensional process that includes both the direct reform of the security sector as well as the broader political-institutional framework through which the governance of the security sector is organized. By default, then, SSR and SSG are inherently ambitious projects that seek to re-write institutional structures in predominantly non-Western contexts and actively engage not just in peacebuilding but also state-building.

The policy framework of SSR and the associated framework of SSG are ultimately situated in the politico-ideological framework that was heavily shaped by the end of the Cold War and the seeming superiority of American-style security governance. A lack of security was viewed as a response to a lack of economic development, with lacking development in turn reinforcing insecure political structures. The solution to these issues, the narrative went, was the whole-scale reformulation of a country's political and security structures, including the democratization of the political apparatus, the liberalization of the economy, and the creation of civil, ideally democratic authorities that would provide sound SSG. The underlying ideological tenets of SSR were subsequently heavily underpinned by the experiences made in Western societies and assumed that a one-to-one replication of these structures would be capable of pacifying political environments elsewhere. These assumptions meant that economic, presumably 'rational' grievances (such as a lack of economic development) rather than ideological, 'irrational' grievances were seen as the root causes of conflict despite ample evidence that this was not necessarily always the case. Moreover, SSR focused explicitly on the reform of formal security forces (such as the army, police, gendarmerie, etc.) and did not formally address the role that more privately organized forms of security continue to play in many developing economies (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2006). The SSR framework was consequently strongly informed by specific assumptions about what constituted good governance and what factors ultimately led to violent conflict. The trajectory of SSR in Afghanistan following the US-led invasion of 2001 indicates how many of these assumptions did not accurately reflect the situation on the ground, culminating in the failure of SSR in Afghanistan.

### **SSR in Afghanistan after 2001**

Following the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 under codename Operation Enduring Freedom, SSR immediately emerged as a strategic priority for the actors involved in rebuilding the

country. In Afghanistan, the international alliance did not just encounter a security sector that required reform: instead, the security sector had to be practically rebuilt from scratch given the Taliban's previous control over Afghanistan. The rapid creation of a security sector was consequently one of the focal points of the Bonn Conference, during which Hamid Karzai was elected as the leader of the Afghan Interim Authority by various political representatives from different Afghan groups (Dennys & Hamilton-Baillie, 2012). The decisions made during the Bonn Conference were also referenced in UNSC Resolution 1386, which mandated the creation of ISAF. Led by the US and ISAF, the Karzai administration was to be supported by the newly founded ANSF, sometimes also known as the ANDSF (Afghan National Defence and Security Forces). The ANSF was constituted by different departments responsible for different components of national security provision, including the Afghan National Army (ANA), the Afghan National Police (ANP), and the Afghan Air Force (AAF). Furthermore, the ANSF incorporated two smaller police units, the Afghan Local Police (ALP, specifically used in more rural areas) and the Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF, focused on protecting infrastructure development projects). Through its creation of the ANSF and the establishment of theoretically demarcated operational mandates, the international allies here created an institutional architecture that was to safeguard and be simultaneously accountable to the government of the Karzai administration.

By design, this form of SSR was ought to be a multilateral process in which different donor countries managed different components of the reform trajectory. Germany was to oversee the establishment and training of the ANP, the UK was responsible for creating the counter-narcotics units, Japan managed the process of disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating (DDR) the units that had previously fought against the Taliban as the Northern Alliance, and Italy oversaw the creation of a judicial system (Goodhand & Sedra, 2006). The US, in turn, was tasked with creating and managing the ANA. The Taliban forces, many of whom had started to regroup in the Afghan-Pakistani borderlands following their initial military defeat, were excluded from the DDR approach developed by the alliance and thus played no formal role in the SSR framework (Howk et al., 2020). The way in which SSR was designed to be implemented was directly aligned with the broader SSR framework discussed above: the security forces were to be professionalized, legitimized, and integrated into a political system where they would be accountable to a democratically elected government. This government would be kept in check by an independent judicial system, thereby ensuring good governance as imagined by Washington and its allies.

In lieu of these initially multilateral designs, American forces quickly gained significant operational control over managing the SSR process of the ANSF as a whole while increasingly making use of Private Security Contractors (PSCs). In practice, the multilateral structuring of the SSR process had produced mixed results as different donor countries prioritized different operational capacities. The German forces, for instance, tasked with training the ANP, focused on creating a numerically quite small but operationally well-trained police force (Ayub et al., 2009). The US, in contrast, stressed the creation of a quantitatively large ANA, an approach that often came at the expense of the operational capacities of the units trained by the Americans (ibid). In 2003, the US took over most of the training of the ANP from Germany

before outsourcing the training responsibilities to DynCorp, a now defunct PSC that was based in the US (Yasa, 2020). Instead of consolidating the coherence of the SSR process, the outsourcing to DynCorp had the inevitable effect that the training of different ANSF units remained only loosely coordinated. DynCorp, for instance, focused on training the ANP in counterinsurgency tactics rather than more classical forms of providing public security in line with a policing mandate (ibid). Partially, then, the use of PSCs such as DynCorp had the effect that police units did not obtain the specific skills the SSR program theoretically required them to acquire. Moreover, the quasi-militarization of police units resulted in an often-militarized conduct by the ANP, which undermined the ANP's social legitimacy in the local population. Outsourcing processes thereby directly contributed to not just operational inadequacies but also a legitimacy deficit.

By 2003/2004, when the Taliban once again began mounting an insurgency, the US intensified its approach to enlarge the ANSF at the expense of the operational capabilities of ANSF units. Since 2001, most of the SSR funds had flown into training and arming the ANA, meaning that police and judicial reforms did not move at the same pace and remained underdeveloped in comparison (Byrd, 2010). The resurgence of the Taliban compounded an emphasis on strengthening the ANA as the main counterforce to the Taliban (Ayub et al., 2009). In practice, this translated into an US-led enlargement of the ANA that paid little heed to improving the operational capabilities of the ANA personnel. Even as the ANA grew in size, it remained too small to effectively govern and control Afghanistan's remotest areas, creating a power vacuum in the Afghan countryside that the returning Taliban began filling by 2004 (Barfield, 2012). While the Taliban was strengthened by the relative weakness of the ANA, the Obama administration further intensified this quantity-based approach. Under Obama, the total size of the ANSF grew from 200,000 to 350,000 troops – as investment in training and equipment did not grow alongside the surge in units, however, thousands of ANSF soldiers were rushed through boot camp without receiving adequate military training (George, 2021). This lack of operational capacity was further compounded by funds being poorly invested or being deliberately misallocated: the ambitions of the US and ISAF to create a modern military apparatus simply did not receive the funds that were necessary to actually fulfil this ambition (Yasa, 2020). The inevitable outcome of all of this was that ANSF units were often poorly trained and lacked the operational capacities to withstand a concerted Taliban offensive in the field.

Poor internal management processes and corrupt structures within the ANSF compounded this lack of operational capacity. The total exclusion of the Taliban forces from the DDR processes and the installation of the Karzai government provided significant leverage to Afghans with a high degree of social influence. Following the fall of the Taliban, many key military positions in the ANSF were thus acquired (and maintained) through patronage relations rather than merit, resulting in the creation of a military apparatus that was characterized by corruption and a lack of military expertise on the highest echelons (Arif, 2017). One key example of deep-seated corruption throughout the ANSF was the presence of so-called 'ghost soldiers'. Desertions were a problem throughout the existence of the ANSF (Ayub et al., 2009). Frequently, however, desertions or deaths of ANSF personnel in the field



would not be reported by commanding officers, who would maintain that the soldiers had not died or deserted to collect the monthly income of those who had died or deserted. Besides the obvious financial cost this incurred, this also meant that the actual number of ANSF troops was highly inflated: according to a 2016 report by the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "*neither the United States nor its Afghan allies know how many Afghan soldiers and police actually exist, how many are in fact available for duty, or, by extension, the true nature of their operational capabilities*" (quoted in BBC, 2021). The extent to which this form of corruption remained an issue over time points towards the prevalence of other structural issues. ANSF personnel was often so poorly paid that claiming the incomes of fallen or deserted soldiers simply translated into another way of making ends meet for them and their families (Rotmann, 2019). With much of the development aid flowing into SSR, donor countries largely failed to create sustainable economic structures that could provide an improved standard of living for the Afghan population, especially in the countryside. While demoralizing the soldiers and thus heightening the risk of desertion, the endemic corruption within the ANSF and Afghan society severely undermined the long-term efficacy of the international aid efforts in the country.

The ANSF furthermore suffered from a lack of social legitimacy that was compounded by the behaviour of the security forces. The relative monopoly on violence allowed ANSF forces to exploit their social position, with the DynCorp-trained ANP being viewed as particularly corrupt (Bowser, 2010). The ANP was also criticized for insufficiently reprimanding corrupt officials and not addressing other structural issues in its ranks, including the widespread illiteracy of ANP personnel (Ayub et al., 2009). The rapid DDR approach pursued after 2001 also resulted in the integration of ethnic militias into the ANSF that pursued the (perceived) interests of the ethnic groups in the name of the ANSF, undermining the legitimacy of the ANSF as a whole (Rotmann, 2019). Although the degree of corruption and competence obviously varied between different ANSF units, the lack of operational capacity and the endemic presence of corruption contributed to an overall legitimacy deficit of the ANSF. The lack of support for the ANSF inevitably empowered the Taliban, providing them with a social platform and the claim that only they could protect civilian populations from purportedly exploitative and brutalizing security forces and their foreign backers. Despite all the money invested into SSR, the SSR programmes failed to create a competent and socially legitimized security apparatus in Afghanistan that could protect the Afghan people following the departure of the United States and its allies.

The shortcomings of the ANSF, a partial result of their lack of social legitimacy, can ultimately not be dissociated from the lack of legitimacy of the Afghan government as a whole. Resource misallocation and corruption were rampant and well-recorded under the Karzai administration and subsequent governments. The consequential sense of public alienation was compounded by the ties between the political elites and criminal syndicates, including those active in drug-related organized crime (Ayub et al., 2009). The general misallocation and evasion of foreign aid by the Karzai government meant that funds allocated for socioeconomic development did not reach their original target and intensified the political illegitimacy of the Western-backed government (Yasa, 2020). As Barfield (2012) observes, the Karzai

administration did not construct an institutional architecture in Afghanistan that could provide good governance – instead, it created a practically patrimonial system in which the State and its institutions became an extension of the President and the political elite in Kabul. Bowser (2010) astutely described this form of regime as a ‘shadow State’, meaning “*a form of personal rule; that is, an authority that is based upon the decisions and interests of an individual, not a set of written laws and procedures, even though these formal aspects of government may exist*” (p. 110). Corruption within the Afghan government thus ultimately failed to create adequate and functioning governance structures while its associated lack of social legitimacy compounded the lacking legitimacy of the ANSF. The shortcomings of the ANSF and SSR in Afghanistan more generally were consequently situated in and reinforced by a corrupt political structure that created weak State institutions, a poorly developed security sector, and a public that was often discontent with the governance provided by the State and its foreign allies. In conjunction, these factors produced a strategic environment in which the Taliban could generate partial public support as well as military leverage, enabling their ultimate takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021.

## **Conclusion**

The failure of the ANSF reflects the structural shortcomings of Security Sector Reform (SSR) in Afghanistan and the overall international approach in Afghanistan. SSR policies in Afghanistan sought to establish an adequate military and defence administration without sufficiently recognizing how structural shortcomings elsewhere would shape the effectiveness of the SSR programmes. Issues like that of ‘ghost soldiers’, for instance, were bound to emerge in a country where socioeconomic development remained heavily impaired and where corruption on every governmental level was endemic. The poor training of security forces inevitably led to the creation of a military force that was lacking military capability, order, and discipline. Corrupt officials capitalized on these structures to extract funds and pursue their respective political and economic interests, weakening the strategic capability of the ANSF, further undermining the extent to which the public supported the ANSF, and intensifying desertions. The precarious strategic situation of the ANSF was further compounded by the unilateral conduct of the United States under the Trump administration, with the 2020 Doha Agreement between the US and the Taliban demoralizing the remaining ANSF forces and motivating further desertions (George, 2021). Although the speed of the ANSF’s collapse may have taken some observers by surprise, the fact that it did happen cannot have been surprising considering the state of the ANSF prior to the American withdrawal.

Conclusively, the criticism voiced by President Biden following the fall of Kabul is not entirely inaccurate: considering the amount of money spent by the international community on rebuilding Afghanistan and the armed forces, more should have been expected from them on paper. That said, their ultimate failure and mass surrender to the Taliban was the inevitable outcome of a SSR programme that failed to be coordinated with other policy responses and was undermined by the diplomatic support for a government that had long lost its popular sway. The failure of SSR in Afghanistan ultimately embodies the failures of statebuilding in the country.

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