

Peter Bergen, Foreign Policy Magazine article, March 2013

What Went Right?

Quick question: Which Asian country has seen its life expectancy go up an astounding 18 years in just one decade, while turning from one of the world's most rural countries into one of its fastest-urbanizing? Oh, and the country's GDP increased tenfold in that same period.

No, this isn't Japan in the 1960s, Singapore in the 1970s, South Korea in the 1980s, or India in the 1990s. It is Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban.

What went wrong in Afghanistan since the American invasion is painfully clear, from the grotesque levels of official corruption to the worrisome rise of insider attacks against NATO forces by Afghan soldiers and police. Nobody is claiming all is coming up roses in a country devastated by decades of conflict. But not everything has gone wrong, either. So perhaps the more interesting question -- and certainly a more underexplored one -- is this: What went right?



Afghanistan just after the November 2001 fall of the Taliban resembled Germany after World War II: The country had been utterly destroyed, around a third of the population had fled, and more than one in 10 of its citizens had been killed in the previous two decades of war. Much of Kabul resembled postwar Dresden, so utter was the destruction of the capital.

When you flew into Kabul's airport, you were greeted by the disquieting sight of teams of de-miners clearing the airfield. This scene was repeated all over Afghanistan, which was then one of the world's most heavily mined countries. Those few visitors who traveled would find village after village empty. What were once houses now lay in fallen-down baked-mud ruins, like the remnants of some long-gone civilization. Many Afghans had fled for Pakistan and Iran during the 1980s and 1990s -- some 6 million out of a population of 15 million.

As a result of the U.S.-led occupation of Afghanistan and the enterprising spirit of the Afghans themselves, Kabul is now rebuilt, the villagers are back, and the once-ubiquitous de-miners have all but disappeared. Furthermore, millions of Afghans have voted with their feet: Since the fall of the Taliban, more than 5 million have returned home. By way of contrast, some 2 million Iraqis left their country during the recent war there. Only a tiny fraction of those refugees has gone back.

The country to which those millions of Afghans have returned is in fundamental respects very different from the one it was before the 9/11 attacks. Let's start with the most obvious point: The Taliban are removed from power. This was a movement that gave sanctuary not only to Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda, but also to pretty much every jihadi militant group from around the Muslim world.

Thanks to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, al Qaeda ("the base" in Arabic) lost the best base it ever had: a country in which it ran something of a parallel state, with training camps churning out thousands of recruits and from which bin Laden and his henchmen conducted their own foreign policy, attacking U.S. embassies and warships, and planned the deadliest mass murder in American history.

Al Qaeda has never recovered from the loss of its Afghan base. Its last successful strike in the West was the July 2005 series of suicide attacks on London's transportation system. Meanwhile, the war against al Qaeda continues to be fought from Afghanistan. The SEAL team that killed bin Laden in 2011 took off in stealth helicopters from an airfield in Jalalabad, in eastern Afghanistan. And the drones that have inflicted heavy losses on other al Qaeda leaders continue to deploy from Afghan bases.

Forget what you hear from some of the more vocal critics of U.S. President Barack Obama's drawdown plans -- the chances of the Taliban coming back to run Afghanistan are now vanishingly small. Favorable views of the Taliban in polling across Afghanistan over the past several years are consistently no more than 10 percent. There is nothing like experiencing life under the Taliban to convince Afghans that the group cannot deliver on its promises of an Islamist utopia here on Earth. And if the Taliban have scant chance of returning to power, their al Qaeda buddies have even less chance of returning to Afghanistan in any meaningful way. Few Muslim countries harbor a more hostile view of al Qaeda and its Arab leaders than Afghanistan.

Afghans have good reasons to fear the Taliban. The group imprisoned half the population inside their homes, preventing women from having jobs and girls from attending school. Although Afghanistan today remains a deeply conservative Muslim society, proportionately more women are now serving in the Afghan parliament than in the U.S. Congress. And while only fewer than 1 million children, almost entirely boys, were in school under the Taliban, now more than 8 million children are in school, more than a third of whom are girls.



One of the most common questions pollsters ask is, "Is your country going in the right direction?" A poll by Rasmussen at the end of December found that **33 percent** of American voters believed their country was going in the right direction. By contrast, a poll of some 6,000 Afghans conducted by the well-regarded Asia Foundation found that in 2012, **52 percent** of Afghans thought their country was on the right track.

This finding isn't so surprising when you consider what remained of the Afghan economy under the Taliban. There were just six commercial banks in the entire country, and, according to the IMF, they were "largely inactive." There was virtually no phone system. Once-bustling Kabul was a city of ghosts, its population down to half a million. Businesses were shuttered, just a few cars drove on the streets, and the 9 p.m. curfew was rigorously enforced by young Taliban foot soldiers wearing distinctive black turbans, their eyes rimmed with black kohl eyeliner, which gave them a look that was both feline and fierce. Radio Voice of Sharia was one of the only sources of Afghan news, and it blared Taliban propaganda. Taliban cabinet ministers huddled around stoves in their offices during the bitter Afghan winters, lecturing visitors like myself about that great Muslim leader, Osama bin Laden.

When I visited Kabul in the winter of 1999, I was the sole guest at the Inter-Continental, the only hotel where the Taliban would allow foreigners to stay. What once passed for a glamorous hotel in 1970s Kabul was now not much more than a bombed-out shell. As the sole guest, I was lucky to get one of the few rooms with still-intact windows to ward off the frigid Afghan winter. The staff at the hotel besieged me with requests for money, which was understandable as the economy was then so bad that even doctors were earning only \$6 a month.

Afghanistan's GDP in 2001 was some \$2 billion -- about the size of Burkina Faso's. In a decade, GDP has gone up to \$20 billion (though much of it is attributable to foreign aid). Today, one in two Afghans has a cell phone, which they use for everything from getting their salaries wired to them to making utility payments. There are also now dozens of newspapers and TV channels. Where once Kabul's streets were largely silent, they are now a bedlam of traffic and thriving small businesses.

Yes, a good deal of aid to Afghanistan has ended up lining the pockets of corrupt Afghan officials or gone back west in the form of large salaries and perks for expatriates. Less well known is that

one of the world's most successful aid programs has been implemented in Afghanistan, funded by organizations such as the U.S. Agency for International Development and the World Bank. Known as the **National Solidarity Program**, the cost-efficient and popular program gives modest grants to local self-elected village councils to do with as they will. Around 30,000 councils have been set up, and they have disbursed some \$1 billion for some 60,000 specific projects since 2003. As a result, thousands of schools and countless irrigation networks have been built, positively affecting the lives of some two-thirds of the rural population.

Or consider this: At the **time of the Taliban**, only a tenth of the population had access to basic health care, a situation made more complicated by the Taliban's medieval view of women. Now, almost all Afghans have access to more and better health care. As a result, in just one decade Afghan life expectancy has gone from 45 years to 62 years for men and 64 for women. This kind of dramatic increase in longevity took four decades to accomplish in the United States between 1900 and the beginning of World War II.

In the West, the general hopelessness of Afghan President Hamid Karzai is a staple of news stories that rightly decry his tolerance for his rapacious family and cronies who feed at the public trough. But let's judge Karzai not against the mayor of a Scandinavian city, but rather the leaders in his immediate neighborhood. To Karzai's west is the Holocaust-denying theocratic autocracy of Iran. To his north is the Soviet-style dictatorship of Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan, where dissidents have been boiled alive. To his east is Pakistan, where four military coups have taken place since the country's independence six and a half decades ago.

Karzai should also be judged by his immediate predecessors. Let's recall Taliban leader Mullah Omar, a dimwitted religious fanatic who turned his country into an international pariah; the warlords who preceded him; and before them Mohammad Najibullah, the communist puppet who replaced the Soviet occupiers when they retreated in 1989 and ended up being hanged from a Kabul lamppost seven years later.

By both regional and Afghan historical standards, Karzai is a reasonably competent leader who -- despite his feckless image in the West and despite being in office for 11 years -- retains considerable popular appeal. In the last Afghan presidential election, when the votes were finally correctly tallied, Karzai had received 49 percent of the vote against dozens of challengers. By contrast, Obama prevailed in the 2012 election against one challenger with 51 percent of the vote. And Britain's David Cameron leads Britain despite his Conservative Party only receiving 36 percent of the vote in the 2010 election that made him prime minister.

Many Westerners have a skewed assessment of the scope of the war in Afghanistan, bracketing it with the war in Iraq. But the conflicts in the two countries are quite different. At the height of the Iraq war in 2006, 100 civilians were dying every day. Today in Afghanistan, around six civilians are dying daily in a war in a country that has a population roughly on par with Iraq's. And who is causing most of those casualties? The Taliban. U.S. and other NATO forces have taken care to ensure that their soldiers do not contribute to the civilian death toll. Indeed, some American cities are today more violent than Afghanistan. In New Orleans, residents are now around six times more likely to be murdered than Afghan civilians are to be killed in the war.

That war is not going as badly as you think, either: In 2012, for instance, Taliban attacks dropped as much as a third compared with the year before. Is this just NATO cooking the books? Nope: These figures come from the **Afghanistan NGO Safety Office** (ANSO), an organization that has collected data about violence in Afghanistan for many years and is far from a cheerleader for the military. In a **2012 report**, ANSO stated that the sharp drop in violence is "the first reliable indicator that the conflict may be entering a period of regression after years of sustained, and compounded, growth by all actors in the field." In January, three U.S. soldiers died in Afghanistan -- the lowest monthly American casualty count in four years. In short, the war is winding down, and the "surge" of 30,000 U.S. soldiers into Afghanistan that was completed in September has indeed blunted the Taliban's momentum.

Could that momentum return? Some smart commentators on Afghanistan worry that the Afghan civil war will renew itself after the United States and other NATO countries withdraw combat troops at the end of 2014. In an influential **July report** in the *New Yorker*, veteran war correspondent Dexter Filkins described how Afghans are girding for another civil war, and he quoted a former U.S. official based in Kabul as saying, "A coup is one of the big possibilities -- a coup or civil war."

This is overwrought. A return to the kind of civil war in which hundreds of thousands died following the 1992 collapse of the Najibullah government is quite unlikely for many reasons, not least the fact that the United States is not going to collapse as the Soviet Union did, an implosion that precipitated the fall of the Najibullah government. When the Russian aid stopped flowing to Najibullah, he couldn't maintain his military, which opened the way for his overthrow.

Today, the United States and Afghanistan have negotiated the **Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement**, which ensures America will continue to play a supporting role there until 2024. The exact details of what that agreement means in practice are still being hammered

out, but they are likely to include not only significant U.S. aid but also several thousand American soldiers stationed in Afghanistan for many years into the future as a guarantor for the country's stability. Other countries are also likely to continue to work with the Afghans in areas like training the army and police well past the end of the NATO combat mission in December 2014. The Afghan National Army, which certainly needs to be further professionalized, is already the single most admired institution in the country. It will not collapse as Najibullah's military did once the Russian money flow dried up, not least because the United States and other NATO countries will not allow it to do so.

Afghanistan is not hopeless. Forty years ago, it was a country at peace with itself and with its neighbors. Kabul, as Nancy Dupree's classic travel guide to Afghanistan in the 1970s so evocatively put it, was "a fast-growing city where tall modern buildings nuzzle against bustling bazaars and wide avenues fill with brilliant flowing turbans, gaily striped *chapans*, mini-skirted schoolgirls, a multitude of handsome faces and streams of whizzing traffic." A couple of hours to the east is Jalalabad, about which Dupree waxed lyrical as she recommended the annual spring poetry festival: "Orange blossoms scent the air, flowers bloom riotously, birds sing and the freshness of spring pervades the atmosphere."

Maybe, not too long from now, a new generation of guidebooks will again be raving about the joys of springtime in the Hindu Kush. Nothing, not even a failed state, lasts forever.