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THE FALL OF AFGHANISTAN AND THE TALIBAN VICTORY OF 2021: WAS IT REALLY AN INTELLIGENCE FAILURE?

Author's name withheld¹

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban captured Kabul and the Western supported Afghan Government collapsed. The fall of the Afghan Government and the Taliban victory was quickly represented as an intelligence failure in the media and by various political figures. This article aims to examine whether it is accurate to describe the collapse of the Afghan State in 2021 as an intelligence failure by conducting a thematic analysis of open-source material related to the conflict in Afghanistan. The results of this analysis demonstrate that policymakers were forewarned about the collapse of the Afghan state by a multitude of different stakeholders for several years prior to August 2021. Labelling the collapse of the Afghan Government an 'intelligence failure' is significantly at odds with the information that was available and illustrates an example of policy makers attributing policy failures to failures of intelligence.

Keywords: Intelligence failure, Afghanistan, Taliban, Afghan Government.

Introduction

The term 'intelligence failure' has been used as an explanatory term to describe events that have surprised policy makers such as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the 9/11 terrorist attacks.¹ Despite the use of the term, there is no agreed definition within the literature of what constitutes an intelligence failure, and Hedley argues this provides a convenient scapegoat for policy makers when they suffer a strategic setback

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or surprise.² Within days of the Taliban's capture of Kabul in August 2021, policy makers and politicians such as the British Foreign Secretary and Republican and Democrat members of the US Congress suggested that the collapse of Afghanistan was an 'intelligence failure'.³ An examination of the available open-source material demonstrates that the collapse of the Afghan Government, its security forces and the Taliban victory was widely predicted in the months and years before August 2021. The claim that the collapse of the Afghan Government and the Taliban's victory was an intelligence failure does not stand up to scrutiny when the available evidence is examined.

The study of intelligence failure has become increasingly prominent since the events of 9/11. A search of the academic literature regarding intelligence failure yields approximately 3,160,000 results, and approximately 2 million of these results were added in the period from 2001 onwards.⁴ Most of the literature regarding intelligence failures emanates from the US, with smaller amounts coming from the United Kingdom and Israel. Eiran argues that the scholarly literature regarding intelligence failure is largely divided into two categories. The first category consists of works that look at intelligence failure through the prism of case studies which examine a specific event, such as the 9/11 terror attacks or the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.⁵ The second category which Eiran identifies in the literature are theories. This category consists of works that explain the underlying causes of intelligence failures as a failure of systems or organisations, rather than through the historic retrospective lens of a specific case study.⁶

Within the literature, there is no accepted definition of intelligence failure amongst scholars and many researchers acknowledge that the lack of an accepted definition poses an ongoing problem.⁷ Dahl proposes a concise definition of intelligence failure as being "either a failure of the intelligence community to produce the intelligence needed by decision makers, or a failure on the part of decision makers to act on that intelligence appropriately".⁸ Dahl also divides the scholarly literature on the causes of intelligence failure into three types of theories, the traditionalist, reformist and contrarian schools.⁹ Dahl describes the traditionalist view as being made up of those scholars such as Betts and Handel who believe intelligence failure is inevitable. Hedley argues that any event that occurs in international affairs that is a surprise and is perceived as negative by US policymakers, is inevitably portrayed as an intelligence failure because politicians and public servants detest being caught by surprise.¹⁰ Many intelligence scholars such as Hedley and Betts agree that intelligence failure is an inevitable part of the function of intelligence agencies and therefore intelligence agencies should not be held responsible. Dahl argues that traditionalists such as Betts and Handel believe that policy makers are frequently the key factor in intelligence failures due to their failure to take heed of the warnings that are provided by intelligence agencies.¹¹

Dahl states that reformist theorists attribute intelligence failure to the organisational and bureaucratic limitations of intelligence agencies and intelligence communities.¹² He pertinently links the reformist school with a number of government sponsored reviews

that tend to sway towards this explanation for intelligence failure.¹³ Dahl describes the contrarian theorists of intelligence failure as being those who believe intelligence failures are “most often caused by failures of intelligence collection rather than problems of analysis or organisation.”¹⁴

Other scholars such as Jensen have proposed different definitions of intelligence failure. Jensen argues that intelligence failures consist of three essential elements, a failure of either accuracy, surprise or the role of decision makers.¹⁵ Jensen defines accuracy as being the ‘what’ part of an intelligence assessment.¹⁶ He defines ‘surprise’ as being the ‘where’ and ‘when’ of an intelligence estimate.¹⁷ Like Dahl, Jensen acknowledges the role that decision makers play in intelligence failures and comments on the habit of policy makers to blame poor policy decisions on intelligence failures.¹⁸

A more complex definition of intelligence failure is proposed by Gentry, who argues that intelligence failures can be sorted into six differing categories:

<i>Summary of Intelligence-related Failure Types and Characteristics</i>		
<i>Type</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Characteristic</i>
1	Threat Warning	Threat warning failure by intelligence agencies
2	Threat Response	Leaders’ failure to respond effectively to threat warnings, by policy or executive action
3	Opportunity Warning	Failure by intelligence agencies to alert policymakers of opportunities to exploit
4	Opportunity Response	Leaders’ failure to effectively exploit opportunities
5	Vulnerability Identification	Failure to recognize one’s own vulnerabilities in the context of other actors’ intentions and capabilities
6	Vulnerability Amelioration	Failure to ameliorate one’s own vulnerabilities

*Figure 1: Summary of Intelligence-related Failure Types and Characteristics.*¹⁹

Although Gentry’s definitions are more detailed than Dahl or Jensen’s, they all recognise that intelligence failures can involve a failure on the part of the intelligence agencies in terms of collection, analysis, and dissemination, as well as a failure of leadership or a policy maker. Gill also recognises the prevalence of these themes in the literature and describes them as an “analysis-dissemination-policy nexus”.²⁰

A shortcoming that is apparent within the wider literature that is certainly present in Dahl, Jensen and Gentry’s work, is the argument that a failure on the part of a decision maker to act on intelligence that has been provided to them constitutes an intelligence failure. Gentry defines this as a threat response or opportunity response type intelligence failure. If intelligence is provided to a policy maker and the policy maker makes the decision to ignore the intelligence or fails to act in a timely or appropriate manner, Gentry suggests that this should not be defined as an intelligence failure. This trend of labelling decision failures by policy makers as examples of intelligence failure is problematic for both intelligence practitioners and policy makers. Labelling decision fail-

ures as intelligence failures can undermine the credibility of intelligence practitioners and does not add to the ability of policy makers to understand the limitations of intelligence. Intelligence agencies and the forecasts that they make are only as effective as the policy makers who are provided with the intelligence. When a policy maker's poor decision or indecision is labelled as an intelligence failure it continues to perpetuate the idea that this failure is somehow a failure of an intelligence agency or process. The failure of policy makers to utilise the intelligence they have been provided with is not a failure of intelligence or the agency that provided it, rather it is argued here that it is a decision failure on the part of the leader. It remains convenient for decision makers to attribute blame to intelligence agencies and their products when they are taken by surprise and enables policy makers to avoid accountability for their decision failures.

While Dahl, Jensen and Gentry have common themes in their attempt to define intelligence failure, there are other theorists who examine intelligence failure from the standpoint of human error. Hatlebreke and Smith examine the cognitive aspect of those who produce the intelligence and the policy makers who are the customers of the intelligence product.²¹ Hatlebreke and Smith argue that intelligence failures stem from discourse failure which expresses itself as the failure, "to identify, analyze, and accept that a significant threat [exists]"²². Hatlebreke and Smith attribute intelligence failures to mental failure on the part of those who produce intelligence and their customers, which contrasts with the failure of systems and organisations approach that is used by other scholars such as Jensen and those from the reformist school.

Alongside the large body of research conducted by scholars on the subject, there has also been many investigations and reviews into perceived intelligence failures commissioned by Western governments that have been made available in the public sphere. The US has conducted several government sponsored reviews into intelligence failures in its history, beginning with a US Senate inquiry that was conducted in 1945 to examine the circumstances regarding the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.²³ This inquiry concluded that the intelligence failures were a result of "errors of judgement" on the part of intelligence agencies and military commanders.²⁴ The inquiry also reported that it believed that "interdepartmental misunderstandings" impacted upon the effectiveness of the intelligence that was available, suggesting human error as the primary failing which aligns with Hatlebreke and Smith's theory of discourse failure and the role that human error plays.²⁵ A failure to appropriately analyse the information into actionable intelligence and disseminate it to decision makers was also the key finding made by Wohlsetter in her seminal work on intelligence failure at Pearl Harbor.²⁶

In more modern times, Western government reviews have been frequently conducted to examine perceived intelligence failures in the age of the global war on terrorism. Examples of these reviews are the US reviews into the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the British, Australian and US inquiries into the intelligence failures related to the invasion of Iraq and the New Zealand Royal Commission of Inquiry into the 2019 Christchurch ter-

ror attacks. Although these reviews are a useful addition to the literature, they can be heavily influenced or politicised, because they have many of the narrative hallmarks of officially sanctioned inquiries. These inquiries are normally conducted in the wake of a perceived intelligence failure that has had negative repercussions on policy makers.

One example of this is the US Senate investigation that was completed approximately a year after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.²⁷ The inquiry ultimately portrayed the events of 9/11 as a failure of the US intelligence agencies, describing the US intelligence community as having “systemic weaknesses” that included a lack of funding, insufficient information sharing, and a largely inexperienced analytical workforce.²⁸ The politicisation of this inquiry was evident in the appointment of US Senator Bob Graham as the Chair of the Commission. Graham was concurrently serving as the Chair of the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence before, during and after the events of 9/11.²⁹ The failure to appoint an independent committee was a conflict of interest as the members of the inquiry entirely consisted of serving US Senators.³⁰ This conflict of interest is exacerbated in the report in that the role of policy makers and their decisions is hardly mentioned in the 20 findings listed in the document.³¹

The 9/11 Commission report that was delivered in 2004 suffers from similar weaknesses in that it was also potentially influenced by political bias. The report largely identified the US intelligence agencies as being at fault due to a lack of information sharing, inter-agency rivalry and a failure of analysis.³² While elements of this criticism were warranted, the 9/11 Commission report lacks credibility due to the protection that was afforded to policy makers who were privy to the highest levels of intelligence. Key figures such as President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney agreed to give testimony to the commission on a condition that their testimony would not be given under oath.³³ This clearly detracts from the credibility of the report and is a further example of the potential for bias that can be inherent in government reviews.

The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the 2019 Christchurch Terrorist Attack has also been criticised as deliberately absolving policy makers from any responsibility.³⁴ The Arotake Review commissioned by the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS) was conducted by an external Five Eyes partner agency and was done for internal purposes, although it was subsequently released, partly redacted. While neither report attributed the attacks to an intelligence failure, both recognised that there were areas for improvement that could be made by the New Zealand intelligence community.³⁵

The British Chilcot inquiry into the 2003 Weapons of Mass Destruction controversy was led by a retired former civil servant, Sir John Chilcot. It is arguably a superior source within the literature largely due to it being able to better defend itself against claims of bias or political influence, because the inquiry report equally criticised elements of the British intelligence community, as well as being scathing of the decision-making actions of the Blair Government.³⁶

While the concept of intelligence failure continues to be contested within the literature recurring themes nevertheless emerge. It is common for scholars or governments to argue that intelligence failures occur due to errors of the intelligence agencies in collection, analysis, and dissemination. Alternatively, the failure of policy makers to take heed of intelligence warnings or to act once informed of a threat is also a theme. Labelling the failures of policy makers as intelligence failures remains convenient for decision makers but problematic for intelligence practitioners. If a decision maker fails to act on intelligence appropriately then arguably this is not a failure of intelligence but a failure of a decision maker to heed it. The contestable dichotomy identified within the literature provides a useful framework with which to address the question of whether the fall of Afghanistan and the Taliban victory was an intelligence failure as many commentators around the globe claim.

Undertaking this project commenced with the compilation of a large amount of open-source data related to the progress of the war in Afghanistan from January 2020 until the the fall of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) in August 2021. This data represented what was known, or easily obtainable by anyone concerned about the prospects in Afghanistan. There are instances within the data where sources dated from before 2020 have been referenced. In this instance, these pieces of data were used as they were subsequently published in a document that was created between January 2020-August 2021. The data set consisted of English language documents produced by government agencies such as official reports, policy documents and intelligence summaries related to the progress of the Afghan conflict. Other material was gathered from media and other private sector organisations such as think tanks and academia. In addition, the Doha Peace agreement of February 2020 between the Trump administration and the Taliban was a pivotal event during the conflict that had far reaching consequences. President Biden's April 2021 announcement that US forces would completely withdraw from Afghanistan was also a significant event during the conflict.³⁷ These two matters were important milestone events included in the data collection.

After analysing all the assembled material, it was clear that there were significant amounts of information available that assessed the key issues related to the question of what would happen following the withdrawal of US/Western forces from Afghanistan. The most prominent of these were the effectiveness of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) security forces, the effectiveness of GIROA governance, the impact of a US/Western withdrawal, Taliban battlefield successes, peace talks/Doha agreement and most significantly for this research, intelligence about the progress of the conflict/forecasts.

Analysis

Effectiveness of GIROA governance

The ability of the GIROA to retain the support of the Afghan population and wage a successful counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign against the Taliban was clearly impacted by endemic corruption. In 2020 the Asia Foundation conducted a survey of Afghans and 85.4% of the respondents said that corruption was a major problem in their daily lives.³⁸

This survey is insightful in that demonstrates the impact of corruption on the daily life of the Afghan population and the lack of trust amongst ordinary Afghans of GIROA and its institutions. Reducing corruption to a tolerable level for the local population is recognised by British and Australian military doctrine as playing a critical role in the prosecution of a successful COIN campaign.³⁹ The level of corruption within the GIROA and its institutions was widely reported on by Western nations and identified by several sources within the dataset as having played a major role in generating support for the Taliban and hampering the efforts of the GIROA.

The US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) released a lessons-learned publication prior to the final collapse of the GIROA in August 2021 that commented on the levels of corruption within the Afghan government. This report quoted comments made by the US Ambassador in 2016 that the “The ultimate point of failure for our efforts wasn’t an insurgency. It was the weight of endemic corruption.”⁴⁰ The ambassador commented on the levels of corruption amongst Afghan officials and his belief that this drove the population into supporting the Taliban.⁴¹ The US ambassador’s comments and the open-source reporting by US government agencies about the impact of corruption on the Afghan people, and the effectiveness of the GIROA clearly demonstrates that this information was freely available to policy makers for several years prior to the collapse. This makes it difficult to argue that the subsequent collapse of an inherently corrupt government, or the reluctance of Afghans to defend the Kabul regime from the Taliban was somehow a failure of intelligence or a surprise to policy makers.

A further aspect of the weakness of the GIROA and its institutions that was widely reported on prior to the events of August 2021, was the inability of the GIROA to sustain itself without enormous amounts of foreign aid. The GIROA’s dependency on foreign aid was widely reported on throughout the data analysed. One example of this is demonstrated by the British House of Lords Select Committee report on Afghanistan that was published in January 2021. This report highlighted the almost total reliance that the GIROA had on foreign aid due to international aid making up 60% of its budget. The report assessed that there were few prospects for domestic revenue to increase due to corruption and the security situation.⁴²

This illustrates that the GIROA was unable to function without Western aid and further emphasises the negative impact of corruption on the effectiveness of the GIROA. The poor state of the Afghan economy in 2021 also calls into question the viability of the agreements that were made by donor nations in relation to the continued financing of the GIROA security forces at a 2012 NATO summit.⁴³ At this summit, NATO countries agreed that as the Afghan domestic economy grew, the Afghan share of funding of its security forces would increase from \$500 million in 2015 to being financially self-sufficient by no later than 2024.⁴⁴

The ability of the GIROA to pay for its own security forces by 2024 was not an achievable goal for the Afghan government. This was recognised by participants of the summit who described this goal as “unrealistic”.⁴⁵ These examples exemplify the financial weakness of the GIROA and demonstrate that this information was clearly available to policy makers. NATO countries assessed that there was little likelihood of the GIROA developing the financial capacity to fund its own military by 2024. If Western aid for the GIROA security forces was due to end in 2024, then it is unclear how the regime was meant to survive. This issue was further emphasised after President Biden announced that all US forces would be withdrawn from Afghanistan by September 2021.⁴⁶

It is difficult to argue that the collapse of the GIROA and its institutions in August 2021 was a surprise or a failure of intelligence when the ability of the Afghan government to remain financially viable or fund its own military was entirely dependent on foreign aid that could not be effectively delivered without the presence of foreign advisors and troops. These factors were evidently public knowledge prior to the collapse of the GIROA and do not constitute an intelligence failure.

Impact of US/Western withdrawal

The second prominent theme noticeable in the data analysed was the anticipated impact of the withdrawal of US and Western forces from Afghanistan. On 14 April 2021, President Biden announced that the US would withdraw its combat forces from Afghanistan by September 2021.⁴⁷ US Generals publicly expressed their concerns about the impact of this announcement. The commander of US forces in Afghanistan, General Kenneth McKenzie expressed his concerns to the US Senate in April 2021 that Afghan forces would not be able to “hold on after we leave” due to the withdrawal of US enablers who provided logistics, intelligence support and firepower.⁴⁸ McKenzie’s concerns were echoed in comments made by US General Joseph Dunford. Dunford testified to the US Senate that if coalition troops withdrew, the Afghan security forces would deteriorate and that “the only debate is the pace of that deterioration.”⁴⁹

The almost complete reliance on US and Western contractors for intelligence, maintenance and logistical support was a recurrent theme throughout the material analysed. On 6 May 2021 a story in the *New York Times* highlighted the near total

reliance of the Afghan Air Force (AAF) on Western military contractors to maintain their air frames, and described how their withdrawal would have a corresponding impact on the ability of AAF to remain operational.⁵⁰ By August 2021, the AAF was unable to function and the GIROA forces lost the ability to conduct aerial resupply, evacuate their wounded, or provide any tactical lift capability to their forces due to the withdrawal of Western contractors. The degradation of the AAF was devastating to the morale of the GIROA security forces.⁵¹ As these examples have shown, it is implausible to argue that the withdrawal of these contractors was not identified as presenting a risk to the ability of the Afghan security forces to continue to resist the Taliban and enable the GIROA to function.

The force multiplier effect that was provided by Western close air support to Afghan forces is exemplified by an Afghan National Army (ANA) regimental commander who stated in 2021 that, “If it were not for the air support of U.S. forces, the Taliban would be sitting inside Kandahar city now.”⁵² The impact of withdrawing Western air support from the battlefield would have been evident to policy makers considering the extent to which the GIROA security forces relied on this support for a tactical advantage. The negative impact of the lack of Western air support would have been compounded when the AAF was unable to provide close air support due its lack of logistical and maintenance support.

These examples demonstrate the concerns that were raised by public officials and the media about the deterioration of the capabilities of the GIROA forces if US and Western forces withdrew from Afghanistan. The withdrawal of US and Western contractor-support fatally hamstrung the GIROA security forces and led to the effective deterioration of their logistics, strike, intelligence, and maintenance capabilities.⁵³ Without direct US and Western battlefield aid such as close air support, Afghan forces were also fatally weakened in their fight against the Taliban. The fatal impact of these factors was clearly recognised and reported on, leaving untenable claims that the collapse of the GIROA and its security forces following the Western withdrawal was an ‘intelligence failure’.

The failure of peace negotiations

The Taliban and the US signed a peace agreement in Doha in February 2020, that set the stage for a US withdrawal from Afghanistan. This peace deal was largely born out of the previous Trump administration’s desire to withdraw from Afghanistan as quickly as possible and end the longest war in US history.⁵⁴ The terms of this deal were for the US to withdraw all its forces from Afghanistan over a nine-month period. In exchange the Taliban agreed that they would not support any terrorist group which wished to use Afghanistan as a base to attack the US and its allies; and that they would enter peace negotiations with the GIROA.⁵⁵

The weakness of this deal and the precarious situation that it left the GIROA in was recognised by many commentators at the time and in the following 12 months. In December 2019, the US Congress established the Afghanistan Study Group (ASG) and tasked it with “identifying policy recommendations that “consider the implications of a peace settlement, or the failure to reach a settlement, on U.S. policy, resources, and commitments in Afghanistan.”⁵⁶ The ASG consisted of a panel of experts that included academics, diplomats, and retired generals. The ASG released its final report on Afghanistan in February 2021. This report concluded that while the US had complied with the terms of the agreement, the Taliban had continually failed to abide by its conditions.⁵⁷ The ASG recommended that further withdrawal of US forces should be conditional on the Taliban’s adherence to the deal and a reduction in violence.⁵⁸

This assessment by the ASG that the Taliban had not reduced their use of violence or attacks against the GIROA security forces was a clear warning to US policy makers that the peace process in Afghanistan was failing. The ASG report correctly identified that further unconditional US troop withdrawals would strengthen the Taliban militarily by continuing to remove their most able battlefield opponents. The Taliban’s continued unwillingness to engage in serious peace negotiations with the GIROA was recognised by numerous other commentators including the US Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) which commented that, “the DIA cited media reports indicating that the Taliban intends to stall the negotiations until U.S. and coalition forces withdraw so that it can seek a decisive military victory over the Afghan government.”⁵⁹

Through media reporting the DIA recognised by early 2021 that the Taliban was insincere in its negotiations with the GIROA and that it was seeking to decide the conflict through a military victory. It is implausible for policy makers to argue that there was an ‘intelligence failure’ when the DIA was openly assessing that the Taliban viewed the peace negotiations with the GIROA as a charade. By May 2021, some open-source analysts clearly recognised the complete failure of the peace process, and that the Doha agreement was ultimately a victory for the Taliban. One analyst criticised the Doha agreement because no costs were imposed on the Taliban for their failure to adhere to the peace process, and it was obvious that the US was determined to withdraw its forces regardless of the outcome of negotiations.”⁶⁰

The evidence suggests that the primary objective of the US in negotiating the Doha agreement with the Taliban was to set the conditions for the US to leave Afghanistan. This was achieved at the cost of fatally weakening the GIROA by withdrawing US and Western support and allowing the Taliban to focus their efforts on attacking the GIROA forces. The Doha agreement imposed no costs on the Taliban for failing to comply with its terms and did not compel the Taliban to engage in serious peace negotiations with the GIROA. Prior to the collapse of the GIROA in August 2021, it is evident that many analysts clearly recognised the failure of the Doha agreement.

GIROA security forces

The collapse of the Afghan security forces was often cited as key evidence of intelligence failure by those who were surprised by the Taliban victory and the fall of the Afghan state.⁶¹ However, several commentators had already recognised that the GIROA forces' logistics capabilities were poor and that they suffered from low morale and poor leadership, making them vulnerable to collapse. A *New York Times* article published in April 2021 reported on the precarious state of an Afghan commander under attack by the Taliban. This commander reacted with despair when he desperately requested reinforcement from his superiors and was offered a single 200 round tin of ammunition in response.⁶²

The inability of the GIROA forces to complete routine logistical tasks such as an ammunition re-supply, illustrate the poor state of the GIROA forces in early 2021. These became even more pronounced once the US and Western forces began to withdraw in April 2021. AAF pilots complained openly to media that they were increasingly relied upon to conduct aerial resupply missions to isolated outposts due to the Taliban's control of road networks.⁶³

The inability to conduct ground based logistical tasks placed an overreliance on the limited number of pilots and airframes in the AAF to conduct logistical tasks and casualty evacuation.⁶⁴ The ability of the AAF to conduct this vital role was further reduced once US and Western maintenance contractors were withdrawn and airframes were unable to be repaired or maintained appropriately.⁶⁵ As these examples show, the poor logistical capabilities of the GIROA forces was public knowledge several months prior to the events of August 2021. In January 2021 the *Combatting Terrorism Centre at the US Military Academy at West Point* noted that the GIROA forces suffered from a 30% attrition rate over multiple years and, in 2020 desertions accounted for an attrition rate of 66% in the Afghan Army and 73% of the Afghan Police.⁶⁶

It is indicative of the poor morale of the GIROA forces that they were suffering this level of attrition on a yearly basis and that most of this attrition was due to desertion. The US Army doctrinally designates a force that has suffered a 30% attrition rate as combat ineffective.⁶⁷ Using this metric, the GIROA forces were arguably combat ineffective due to their attrition rates, and this was evident well before August 2021. The US military theorist Leonard Wainstein has argued that there are five elements which can render a military unit ineffective. These five elements are a loss of personnel; loss of equipment, combat and support through destruction by the enemy, or by maintenance failure; failure of supply such as petrol and ammunition, collapse of the command structure and death of commanders, loss of communications and a loss of morale.⁶⁸ In the case of the GIROA forces, a number of these factors were known by US decision-makers to have been present and this undermines any claim that the August 2021 resurgence of the Taliban came as a surprise as the result of intelligence shortfalls.

Taliban success on the battlefield and territorial gains

A clear indicator of things to come was the acceleration of Taliban ascendancy after the announcement of the Western withdrawal in April 2021. The continued battlefield success of the Taliban was open-source knowledge that was frequently reported on with alarm by many commentators, analysts, and the media.⁶⁹ Foreign media described how the Taliban isolated GIROA outposts from support and resupply by surrounding them and then sending a local elder to negotiate with the GIROA forces. The Taliban would offer safe passage to the GIROA forces if they surrendered their weapons and equipment, or execution if they stayed and fought.⁷⁰

The graphic in *Figure 2* demonstrates the large amount of territory that was captured by the Taliban in the space of approximately three months. This graphic was based on information that had been compiled by a variety of sources such as media reports, GIROA sources, information from the Taliban and local sources on the ground in Afghanistan.⁷¹ This graphic was publicly released on 15 July 2021 approximately a month before the Taliban captured Kabul and the GIROA collapsed. The Taliban tactics of isolating, surrounding, and capturing GIROA forces were devastatingly effective, when combined with the weaknesses of the GIROA forces and the withdrawal of Western forces. The Taliban's gradual ascendancy from 2020 onwards and their rapid advances in 2021 were clearly public knowledge that was being raised as a concern by many analysts and commentators signalling a likely rapid collapse of the GIROA.⁷²

Intelligence and forecasts about the course of the war

It is essential to consider what intelligence assessments and forecasts were predicting about the outcome of the war in the period between January 2020–August 2021. The US Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) released its Annual Threat Assessment (ATA) on 9 April 2021. This document is publicly released on an annual basis by the ODNI and looks at worldwide threats to the US.⁷³ In regard to the conflict in Afghanistan the ATA forecasted “that prospects for a peace deal will remain low during the next year. The Taliban is likely to make gains on the battlefield, and the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdraws support.”⁷⁴ President Biden's announcement of the withdrawal five days later on 14 April 2021, either clearly disregarded this assessment, or his administration was determined to proceed with the withdrawal despite the consequences.

The US Department of Defense's Office of the Inspector General prepared a report in relation to the progress of the US led mission in Afghanistan for the period of 1 April 2021–30 June 2021. This document was publicly released in August 2021 however it contains many details from the US Defence Intelligence Agency's (DIA) assessment of the state of the conflict in Afghanistan that was made in early 2021.⁷⁵ One extract from this document illustrates the accuracy of US intelligence reporting during this

period; “following the U.S. withdrawal, the Taliban will probably increase its use of large-scale military operations throughout the country as it grows more confident in its ability to defeat the Afghan government militarily.”⁷⁶ This pattern of Taliban attacks rapidly increased from the beginning of 2021 and the DIA evidently had little faith in the ability of the GIROA forces to withstand the increasingly ascendant Taliban.⁷⁷ The DIA assessed that, “the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) “very likely will struggle” to defend and hold territory and reverse Taliban advances during the second half of 2021.”⁷⁸

Throughout the early months of 2021 an increasing amount of media reporting predicted that the collapse of the GIROA would occur in the coming months. On 23 June 2021, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article that quoted the predictions of US intelligence officials when assessing the longevity of the GIROA and its ability to resist the Taliban. The article stated that the latest view of intelligence analysts and US military officials was that the GIROA and Kabul could fall between 6-12 months after US forces depart.⁷⁹ It also commented that some officials assessed that the GIROA’s collapse could occur as soon as three months after the withdrawal of US forces.⁸⁰ Despite these accurate assessments being publicly available, it appears that they had limited bearing on the willingness of some policy makers and sections of the media to label the collapse of the GIROA as an intelligence failure in the days and weeks following August 2021.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the rapid resurgence of the Taliban in the wake of the western withdrawal from Afghanistan was anything but an intelligence failure. A substantial body of open-source evidence has been identified and assessed here that shows that the collapse of the GIROA and the Taliban victory was predicted by many sources in the 18-month period prior to August 2021. Six key themes have been highlighted from open and available sources prior to the collapse of the GIROA. These represented major concerns and clear warning signs that the GIROA could not last long in an environment of endemic corruption and economic frailty. This was compounded by the withdrawal of western forces, and the logistics, maintenance and civilian contractor capabilities that were critical to the survival of the Afghan security forces. Finally, publicly available intelligence reports have been identified which outlined in no uncertain terms that the prospects for the survival of the GIROA were grim, and unlikely to take long to manifest themselves. It is problematic that in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the GIROA policy makers and commentators described this collapse as an intelligence failure. This is problematic for intelligence agencies and practitioners due to their limited ability to publicly disclose what intelligence assessments were available to policy makers prior to the event taking place. Blaming intelligence agencies and their assessments provides politicians and decision makers alike with a useful scapegoat. This weakens any criticism or scrutiny of their decisions and policies, while potentially undermining confidence in intelligence agencies and their assessments. UK Defence

Secretary Ben Wallace stated in September 2021 that he recognised in July 2021 that Kabul was going to fall imminently, and that history shows “it’s not about the failure of intelligence, it’s about the limits of intelligence”.⁸¹ Wallace’s recognition that intelligence is not clairvoyant is a pertinent lesson for policy makers and further demonstrates that describing the collapse of the GIROA as an intelligence failure is misleading and clearly at odds with the evidence.

1 John Hollister Hedley, “Learning from Intelligence Failures,” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 18, no. 3 (October 2005), pp. 435–50.,

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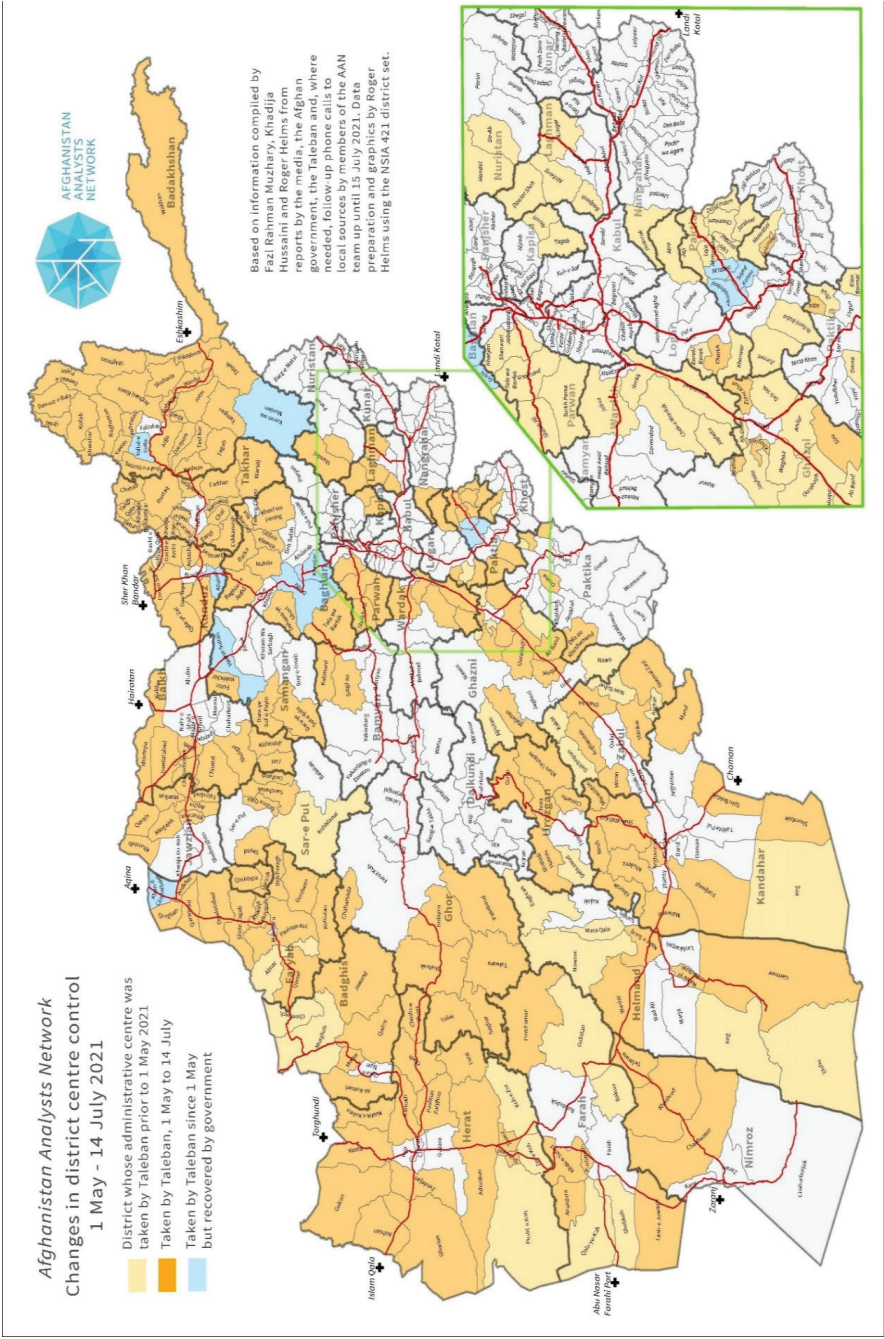


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