

afghan war us

The Afghan War, a defining conflict of the early 21st century, profoundly impacted both Afghanistan and the United States. This extensive engagement, often referred to as the "Afghan War US" collaboration and subsequent prolonged presence, spanned two decades, involving intricate geopolitical maneuvers, significant military operations, and vast human and financial costs. Understanding the arc of the Afghan War for the US necessitates examining its origins, the evolving strategies, the challenges faced, and its eventual conclusion. This article delves into the multifaceted nature of the US involvement in Afghanistan, exploring the initial motivations, the shifting objectives, the complexities of nation-building, the role of international alliances, and the long-term consequences of this protracted military endeavor. We will dissect the key phases of the US mission in Afghanistan, from the initial post-9/11 invasion to the eventual withdrawal, providing a comprehensive overview of this pivotal historical period and its lasting implications.

- Introduction to the Afghan War US Involvement
- Table of Contents
- The Genesis of US Intervention in Afghanistan
- Operation Enduring Freedom: The Initial Phase
- Shifting Strategies and the Rise of Counterinsurgency
- The Challenges of Nation-Building and State-Building
- The Role of International Alliances in the Afghan War
- Key Milestones and Turning Points in the US Afghan War
- The Long Road to Withdrawal: Debates and Decisions
- The Human and Financial Costs of the Afghan War for the US
- Legacy and Lasting Implications of the US Afghan War
- Conclusion: Reflections on the Afghan War US Experience

The Genesis of US Intervention in Afghanistan

The roots of the US involvement in Afghanistan trace directly back to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The al-Qaeda network, led by Osama bin Laden, claimed responsibility for the devastating assaults on American soil. At the time, al-Qaeda operated with the sanctuary and support of the Taliban regime, which governed Afghanistan. The immediate US response was to demand the

Taliban hand over bin Laden and dismantle al-Qaeda's infrastructure. When the Taliban refused, President George W. Bush declared a "War on Terror," with Afghanistan being the initial theater of operations.

The objective was clear: to dismantle al-Qaeda, prevent Afghanistan from serving as a base for international terrorism, and to topple the Taliban government that harbored them. This initial phase was characterized by a relatively swift military victory, with US-led coalition forces quickly dislodging the Taliban from power and establishing a new interim government. The early success, however, masked the underlying complexities of the Afghan landscape and the persistent threat posed by the resurgent Taliban and other extremist groups. The initial mission was perceived by many in the US as a decisive and necessary retribution.

The September 11th Attacks and the Al-Qaeda Nexus

The catalyst for the US military intervention in Afghanistan was undeniably the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. These coordinated assaults, which claimed nearly 3,000 lives, were orchestrated by al-Qaeda, a militant Islamist organization. The group's leader, Osama bin Laden, had found refuge in Afghanistan under the protection of the Taliban. This direct link between the attacks and the Taliban regime's complicity created a clear imperative for US action. The demand for bin Laden's extradition was met with defiance, solidifying the Taliban's status as an enemy of the United States.

The Taliban Regime and its Role

The Taliban, a Pashtun-dominated Islamic fundamentalist movement, had seized control of most of Afghanistan in the mid-1990s after years of civil war. Their rule was characterized by strict adherence to Sharia law, widespread human rights abuses, and the suppression of women. Critically for the US, the Taliban provided a safe haven for al-Qaeda and other foreign terrorist organizations, allowing them to train, plan, and operate with relative impunity. This patronage of terrorist groups made the Taliban a direct target of US foreign policy and military action.

Operation Enduring Freedom: The Initial Phase

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) commenced on October 7, 2001, marking the beginning of the US military campaign in Afghanistan. The initial phase was characterized by air superiority, special forces operations, and the leveraging of local Afghan opposition groups, primarily the Northern Alliance. The strategy aimed to swiftly defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda, install a new, more amenable government, and then withdraw. This approach was influenced by the perceived success of rapid military interventions in other contexts.

The early months of OEF saw the collapse of Taliban defenses and the establishment of an interim administration led by Hamid Karzai. The international community, through the United Nations, supported this transition, signaling a commitment to rebuilding Afghanistan. However, the swiftness of the military victory did not translate into a complete eradication of the Taliban or al-Qaeda. Many fighters simply melted away into the rugged Afghan terrain, especially in the eastern and southern regions, laying the groundwork for future insurgency.

Air Power and Special Operations

The initial US strategy heavily relied on air power and the covert capabilities of US special operations forces. Precision airstrikes targeted Taliban and al-Qaeda strongholds, command and control centers, and training camps. Special forces units worked alongside Afghan resistance fighters, providing intelligence, training, and direct combat support. This approach minimized the need for a large-scale ground invasion in the early stages, capitalizing on the technological advantage of the US military.

The Role of the Northern Alliance

The Northern Alliance, a coalition of anti-Taliban warlords and their forces, proved to be a crucial partner for the US during the initial invasion. They provided the primary ground forces to confront the Taliban on the battlefield, receiving US air support and logistical assistance. The alliance's military capabilities and their established networks within Afghanistan were instrumental in the rapid collapse of Taliban control over major cities, including Kabul. Their participation was seen as a key factor in the early successes of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Shifting Strategies and the Rise of Counterinsurgency

As the initial euphoria of military success waned, it became increasingly apparent that the security situation in Afghanistan remained fragile. The Taliban, far from being defeated, began to regroup and launch increasingly sophisticated attacks. This led to a gradual shift in US strategy from a purely counter-terrorism focus to a broader counterinsurgency (COIN) approach. This new doctrine emphasized winning the hearts and minds of the Afghan population, building Afghan security forces, and addressing the root causes of instability.

Under President Barack Obama's administration, the US significantly increased its troop presence in Afghanistan, a "surge" aimed at bolstering security and enabling counterinsurgency operations. The COIN strategy involved a more comprehensive approach, including development aid, political engagement, and efforts to strengthen the Afghan government and its institutions. The aim was to create a stable and secure environment where the Taliban could not regain a foothold and where Afghans could build their own future. This shift reflected a growing understanding of the complex nature of the conflict.

The Evolution of US Objectives

The initial objective of dismantling al-Qaeda and removing the Taliban from power evolved over time. As the conflict deepened, the US mission expanded to include nation-building, promoting democracy, and fostering economic development. These broader goals, while noble, proved to be immensely challenging to achieve in the deeply tribal and often fragmented Afghan society. The lack of a clear exit strategy and the shifting definition of success contributed to the prolonged nature of the US involvement.

The Counterinsurgency Doctrine

The counterinsurgency doctrine, as refined by military theorists and implemented in Afghanistan, sought to defeat insurgent groups by separating them from the population they sought to influence. This involved providing security, delivering essential services, and fostering economic opportunities. The strategy also entailed training and equipping Afghan national security forces to eventually take over the country's security responsibilities. The effectiveness of COIN was a subject of continuous debate among policymakers and military leaders.

The Challenges of Nation-Building and State-Building

One of the most significant challenges faced by the US in Afghanistan was the complex and arduous task of nation-building. Afghanistan had been ravaged by decades of conflict, had weak central governance, and was deeply divided along ethnic and tribal lines. The US, alongside its international partners, sought to establish democratic institutions, build a functional economy, and create a unified national identity, but these efforts were hampered by a host of internal and external factors.

Corruption within the Afghan government, weak rule of law, and the persistence of powerful warlords undermined efforts to create a stable and legitimate state. Furthermore, the porous border with Pakistan facilitated the movement of Taliban fighters and their resources, creating a persistent sanctuary for the insurgency. The cultural and historical context of Afghanistan, with its strong traditions of local governance and distrust of central authority, also presented considerable obstacles to Western-style nation-building.

Establishing Democratic Institutions

The US invested heavily in establishing democratic institutions in Afghanistan, including holding presidential and parliamentary elections. While these elections marked important milestones, they were often marred by allegations of fraud and low voter turnout in many areas. The challenges of creating a robust and inclusive political system that could gain the trust of all segments of Afghan society proved to be a monumental undertaking. The process of decentralizing power and ensuring equitable representation was an ongoing struggle.

Developing the Afghan National Security Forces

A cornerstone of the US strategy was the training and equipping of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP). The goal was to build a capable indigenous force that could eventually take over the country's security responsibilities. While significant progress was made in building these forces, they continued to face challenges with recruitment, retention, corruption, and the ability to operate independently. The reliance on coalition support remained a persistent issue throughout the conflict.

Addressing Corruption and Governance Issues

Corruption was a pervasive problem that plagued Afghanistan and significantly undermined US efforts to build a stable state. Aid money was often siphoned off, and government institutions struggled to deliver basic services to the population. The US and its allies implemented various anti-corruption initiatives, but these met with limited success. The deeply entrenched nature of corruption, often intertwined with informal power structures, made it difficult to address effectively.

The Role of International Alliances in the Afghan War

The US intervention in Afghanistan was not a unilateral undertaking. It was conducted under the broad umbrella of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and involved a coalition of many countries. NATO invoked Article 5 of its treaty, the collective defense clause, for the first time in its history, signaling a commitment to solidarity with the United States following the 9/11 attacks. This internationalization of the conflict brought a diversity of resources, expertise, and political support.

However, the nature of allied contributions varied significantly, with some nations taking on more active combat roles while others focused on development and reconstruction efforts. Differing national interests and strategic priorities sometimes led to friction and a lack of unified action. The long duration of the war also placed a strain on the commitment of some allies, leading to questions about the sustainability of the international effort and the division of labor within the coalition.

NATO's Involvement and Article 5

Following the 9/11 attacks, NATO's North Atlantic Council activated Article 5, deeming the attacks on the US as an attack against all its members. This paved the way for NATO to take a leading role in the security assistance and, eventually, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. ISAF's mandate expanded over time to include not only Kabul but the entire country, reflecting a growing commitment from the alliance to stabilizing Afghanistan.

Contributions from Partner Nations

Beyond NATO members, numerous other countries contributed to the international effort in Afghanistan. These contributions ranged from military personnel and equipment to financial aid and development assistance. Countries like Australia, Japan, and several Muslim-majority nations played important roles in specific areas, such as reconstruction, training Afghan forces, or providing diplomatic support. The breadth of international involvement underscored the global nature of the fight against terrorism.

Challenges of Coalition Warfare

Operating a coalition of this size and scope presented significant challenges. Differences in military doctrine, equipment, language, and legal frameworks required extensive coordination and adaptation. Political considerations within member states also influenced the extent and nature of their

participation. The "Afghan War US" experience highlighted the complexities of managing a multinational military operation over an extended period, including decision-making processes and the sharing of burdens.

Key Milestones and Turning Points in the US Afghan War

The two-decade-long US involvement in Afghanistan was marked by several key milestones and turning points that significantly shaped the trajectory of the conflict. These events often led to shifts in strategy, increases or decreases in troop levels, and profound changes in the political and security landscape of the country. Understanding these moments is crucial for grasping the dynamic nature of the US Afghan War.

The initial invasion and the swift overthrow of the Taliban were early triumphs. However, the resurgence of the Taliban and the increasing complexity of the insurgency presented a persistent challenge. The surge in US troops under President Obama marked a significant intensification of the military effort, aimed at reversing Taliban gains. Conversely, the decision to begin drawing down forces and transitioning security responsibilities to Afghan forces signaled a shift towards ending the direct US combat role.

The Fall of Kabul and the Bonn Agreement

The capture of Kabul by the Northern Alliance in November 2001, with US air support, was a pivotal moment. This was followed by the Bonn Agreement in Germany in December 2001, which established an interim authority for Afghanistan and laid the groundwork for a new political order. This agreement was seen as a significant step towards establishing a legitimate Afghan government and garnering international support for the country's reconstruction.

The Resurgence of the Taliban

By the mid-2000s, the Taliban began to regroup and regain influence, particularly in the southern and eastern provinces. Their insurgency grew in strength and sophistication, employing tactics such as suicide bombings and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). This resurgence indicated that the initial military success had not eradicated the threat and that a more sustained and complex counterinsurgency effort would be required.

The 2009 Surge and its Impact

In 2009, President Obama announced a significant increase in US troop numbers, known as the surge. The surge aimed to push back the Taliban, secure key population centers, and create space for the development of Afghan security forces and governance. While the surge initially led to a reduction in Taliban influence in some areas, it also intensified the conflict and raised questions about the long-term sustainability of such a large US military presence.

The Long Road to Withdrawal: Debates and Decisions

The question of withdrawal from Afghanistan was a constant undercurrent throughout the US involvement. As the conflict dragged on, with no clear end in sight, debates intensified within the US political and military establishment regarding the strategy and the ultimate objectives. The decision to withdraw was a complex one, influenced by a confluence of factors, including the cost of the war, the evolving geopolitical landscape, and the perceived lack of progress in achieving definitive victory.

Under President Donald Trump, a strong push for withdrawal gained momentum. Negotiations with the Taliban led to the Doha Agreement in February 2020, which outlined a timeline for US troop withdrawal in exchange for certain Taliban commitments, such as severing ties with al-Qaeda. President Joe Biden inherited this agreement and ultimately decided to proceed with the withdrawal, bringing an end to the US military's 20-year presence in Afghanistan.

The Obama Administration's Drawdown Plans

The Obama administration initially pursued a strategy of "clear, hold, and build," coupled with a phased drawdown of US troops. The aim was to gradually transfer security responsibilities to Afghan forces, allowing for a responsible exit. However, the pace and effectiveness of this transition were closely watched, with concerns about the capacity of Afghan forces to stand alone against the Taliban.

The Trump Administration's Negotiation with the Taliban

President Trump signaled a strong desire to end US involvement in what he termed "endless wars." This led to direct negotiations with the Taliban, bypassing the Afghan government. The Doha Agreement, signed in February 2020, set a date for the withdrawal of US forces by May 1, 2021, provided the Taliban met certain conditions. This agreement was controversial, with critics arguing it legitimized the Taliban without adequate guarantees.

President Biden's Decision to Complete the Withdrawal

Upon taking office, President Biden reviewed the Doha Agreement and ultimately decided to proceed with the withdrawal, extending the deadline to August 31, 2021. The final stages of the withdrawal were marked by significant challenges, including the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's swift takeover of the country. The chaotic nature of the exit drew widespread criticism and raised questions about the preparedness and planning for the post-US Afghanistan.

The Human and Financial Costs of the Afghan War for the US

The Afghan War, spanning two decades, imposed immense human and financial costs on the United

States. The lives of American service members were tragically lost, and many others returned home with physical and psychological wounds that continue to affect them and their families. The financial expenditure on the war effort was staggering, diverting vast resources that could have been used for domestic priorities.

Beyond the direct costs, the war had broader societal implications, impacting the families of deployed personnel and shaping public discourse on foreign policy and military intervention. The long-term consequences of the war, including the care of veterans and the geopolitical ramifications of the US withdrawal, will continue to be felt for years to come. The Afghan War US experience serves as a stark reminder of the profound sacrifices involved in prolonged military engagements.

Casualties and Wounded Service Members

Over the course of the war, more than 2,400 American service members were killed in action in Afghanistan. Tens of thousands more were wounded, many suffering from injuries that would require lifelong care and rehabilitation. The psychological toll of combat, including rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), also represented a significant human cost for those who served.

The Financial Burden of the War

The economic cost of the US involvement in Afghanistan is estimated to be in the trillions of dollars. This includes military operations, equipment, training Afghan forces, and development assistance. The sheer scale of this expenditure had a significant impact on the US national debt and budget priorities. The "Afghan War US" expenditure represented a substantial commitment of national resources.

Impact on Veterans and Their Families

The war had a profound impact on the millions of American service members who deployed to Afghanistan and their families. Veterans often faced challenges reintegrating into civilian life, dealing with physical and mental health issues, and finding employment. The sacrifices made by military families, including extended separations and the constant worry for their loved ones, were also a significant human cost.

Legacy and Lasting Implications of the US Afghan War

The legacy of the US involvement in Afghanistan is complex and multifaceted, with long-term implications that continue to unfold. The war reshaped the geopolitical landscape of South Asia, impacted regional stability, and influenced the global fight against terrorism. The withdrawal of US forces and the subsequent Taliban takeover have raised critical questions about the effectiveness of US foreign policy and the limits of military intervention.

The experiences of the Afghan War have led to extensive introspection within the United States regarding its role in the world, the strategies employed in counterinsurgency operations, and the

challenges of nation-building. The lessons learned, both positive and negative, will undoubtedly shape future US foreign policy decisions and military engagements. The "Afghan War US" narrative is still being written, with its ultimate impact yet to be fully understood.

Geopolitical Ramifications in South Asia

The US withdrawal and the Taliban's return to power have had significant geopolitical ramifications for South Asia. The region's stability, the rise of extremist groups, and the relationship between Afghanistan and its neighbors, particularly Pakistan, have all been profoundly affected. The re-emergence of the Taliban has also raised concerns about the potential for Afghanistan to once again become a haven for international terrorist organizations.

The Debate on the Effectiveness of US Strategy

The two-decade-long engagement has spurred considerable debate about the effectiveness of US strategy in Afghanistan. Critics point to the vast expenditure of resources, the human cost, and the ultimate failure to establish a stable and self-sustaining Afghan government. Supporters argue that US intervention did prevent further terrorist attacks on American soil and provided opportunities for Afghan women and girls, albeit temporarily. The lack of a clear victory has led to a re-evaluation of US foreign policy objectives and methods.

Lessons Learned for Future Interventions

The Afghan War US experience offers a wealth of lessons for future military interventions and nation-building efforts. These lessons underscore the importance of clear objectives, realistic expectations, thorough understanding of local contexts, and the need for long-term commitment and flexibility. The challenges of winning "hearts and minds," combating deeply entrenched insurgencies, and addressing systemic corruption remain critical considerations for policymakers and military planners.

Conclusion: Reflections on the Afghan War US Experience

The Afghan War US engagement stands as one of the longest and most complex military conflicts in American history. From its origins in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the US mission evolved through various phases, encompassing counter-terrorism, counterinsurgency, and extensive nation-building efforts. The war profoundly impacted Afghanistan, transforming its political landscape and societal fabric, while also leaving an indelible mark on the United States.

The human and financial costs were immense, underscoring the profound sacrifices made by American service members and the significant economic burden placed upon the nation. While the initial objectives of dismantling al-Qaeda and preventing future attacks were partially met, the long-term goal of establishing a stable and democratic Afghanistan proved elusive. The withdrawal of US forces and the subsequent Taliban takeover have prompted a critical re-evaluation of US foreign policy, military strategies, and the enduring challenges of intervening in complex geopolitical

environments. The lessons learned from the Afghan War US experience will continue to inform discussions and decisions regarding national security and international engagement for generations to come.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the long-term consequences of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan?

The US withdrawal has led to the Taliban's return to power, a humanitarian crisis, and concerns about regional stability and the potential resurgence of terrorist groups. It has also raised questions about the effectiveness of US foreign policy and nation-building efforts.

How has the Afghan War impacted US foreign policy and military strategy?

The lengthy and costly nature of the war has led to a re-evaluation of US interventionism, a greater focus on counter-terrorism with less emphasis on large-scale nation-building, and a shift towards great power competition.

What were the primary objectives of the US intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11?

The initial objectives were to dismantle al-Qaeda, prevent Afghanistan from being a safe haven for terrorists, and overthrow the Taliban regime that harbored al-Qaeda.

What is the current humanitarian situation in Afghanistan post-US withdrawal?

Afghanistan faces a severe humanitarian crisis characterized by widespread poverty, food insecurity, lack of access to healthcare, and a breakdown of essential services, exacerbated by international sanctions and the Taliban's governance.

How has the war affected veterans and their reintegration into society?

Many veterans struggle with physical and mental health challenges, including PTSD, from their service. The prolonged nature of the conflict and the circumstances of the withdrawal have added layers of complexity to their reintegration and support.

What is the role of Pakistan in the Afghan conflict and its aftermath?

Pakistan has played a complex and often controversial role, supporting the Taliban while also

cooperating with the US on counter-terrorism. Its influence remains significant in shaping Afghanistan's future.

What lessons can be learned from the US involvement in the Afghan War?

Key lessons include the challenges of nation-building in complex environments, the importance of clear objectives and exit strategies, the limits of military power in achieving political outcomes, and the need for robust understanding of local dynamics.

How has the Afghan War shaped global perceptions of the United States?

The war has influenced global perceptions, leading to questions about US reliability, its commitment to democracy promotion, and the effectiveness of its foreign policy, while also highlighting its significant investment and sacrifices.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the Afghan War and the US, with descriptions:

1.

The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11

This book meticulously traces the rise of Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, detailing the events and ideological currents that led to the September 11th attacks. It provides crucial context for understanding the US response and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan. Lawrence Wright's in-depth reporting reveals the complex history and the key players involved in shaping the global threat. The narrative highlights the intelligence failures and the escalating radicalization that paved the way for war.

2.

Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001

Steve Coll's seminal work delves into the covert operations and intelligence gathering that defined America's relationship with Afghanistan long before 9/11. It uncovers the intricate dance between the CIA, the mujahideen, and the Pakistani ISI. The book exposes the unintended consequences of US policy in the region and how it inadvertently fostered the environment for extremism. This is essential reading for understanding the pre-war landscape.

3.

The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War

This explosive exposé by The Washington Post reveals a trove of candid interviews with hundreds of

individuals involved in the 20-year war. It exposes the consistent misrepresentations and failures of US strategy and political leadership throughout the conflict. The book presents a damning indictment of the decisions made and the disconnect between the reality on the ground and the official narrative. It offers a critical retrospective on the war's ultimate outcome.

4.

War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Orchestrate America's Turn to War

While not exclusively about Afghanistan, Norman Solomon's influential book provides a broader critique of how American media and political elites have historically manufactured consent for war. He analyzes the propaganda techniques and rhetorical strategies used to justify military interventions, including the early justifications for entering Afghanistan. The book encourages readers to be critical consumers of war reporting. It offers a valuable framework for understanding the public perception management surrounding the conflict.

5.

American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History

Chris Kyle's personal account offers a visceral and unvarnished look at his experiences as a Navy SEAL sniper in Iraq and Afghanistan. The memoir details the intense combat, the moral complexities, and the profound impact war had on him and his fellow soldiers. Kyle's narrative provides a ground-level perspective on the realities of fighting in these conflicts. It's a powerful, albeit controversial, firsthand depiction of the battlefield.

6.

The Outpost: An Untold Story of American Valor

Jake Tapper's gripping narrative chronicles the Battle of Kamdesh at COP Keating in Afghanistan. It highlights the courage and sacrifice of American soldiers facing overwhelming odds against the Taliban. The book vividly portrays the strategic blunders that led to the outpost's vulnerability and the heroic efforts of those who fought and died there. It serves as a poignant tribute to the troops and a stark reminder of the harsh realities of the war.

7.

Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam

Although focused on Vietnam, this book by Nick Turse offers a crucial comparative lens for understanding the ethical and operational issues that arose in Afghanistan as well. Turse meticulously documents documented atrocities and the systemic disregard for civilian lives committed by American forces. His investigative approach provides a framework for questioning official narratives and demanding accountability in any protracted conflict. This critical analysis encourages skepticism towards the justifications for war and its execution.

8.

Scoreboard: War and its consequences in Afghanistan

This collection of essays and reports offers diverse perspectives on the multifaceted consequences of the prolonged conflict in Afghanistan. It examines the human cost, the social and political ramifications for the Afghan people, and the long-term effects on the region. The book moves beyond a purely military focus to explore the broader impact of war on a nation. It provides a nuanced understanding of the war's legacy.

9.

Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia

Ahmed Rashid's comprehensive analysis explores the origins and ideology of the Taliban, tracing their rise to power in Afghanistan and their connections to regional politics. The book offers critical insights into the underlying forces driving the conflict and the complexities of Central Asian geopolitics. It sheds light on the socio-economic and religious factors that fueled the Taliban movement. Understanding these roots is vital for comprehending the challenges faced by US forces.

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