

Dariusz S. KOZERAWSKI 

Jagiellonian University in Kraków

d.kozerawski@uj.edu.pl

THE WITHDRAWAL OF INTERNATIONAL FORCES FROM AFGHANISTAN – SECURITY THREATS FOR THE STATES AND THE REGION

ABSTRACT The paper discusses the problem of the withdrawal of multinational forces from the territory of Afghanistan in 2021. An attempt is made to answer the question: What has caused the failure of the international intervention and what could the further consequences of the withdrawal of the NATO coalition forces be? The paper also presents the problem of the decay of Afghanistan and threats to Polish military contingents during the ‘Enduring Freedom’, ISAF and ‘Resolute Support’ operations. The study takes advantage of the results of unique research conducted by the author in the zones of war and stabilization in Afghanistan and previously unpublished source documents. The field research was carried out in the area of responsibility of the Polish Task Force stationed in the Ghazni province in March and April 2009. Moreover, the non-confidential part of the documentation from the activities of individual organizational units of the Polish military contingent was used. The chapter may be of interest to researchers of international and national security, academics (teachers and students) of military and civilian universities as well as activists of governmental and non-governmental organizations providing aid in areas of armed conflicts and after their end.

Keywords: international security, Afghanistan, multinational operation, forces withdrawal

INTRODUCTION

The attack on the World Trade Center in New York (September 11, 2001) constituted a breakthrough in the perception of the scale of threats from international terrorism. In reaction to that event an anti-terrorist operation was launched in Afghanistan (initially by the United States, and after January 2002 joined by other allied countries – including Poland).¹ Simultaneously, it should be emphasized that activities of this type constituted a new – in many respects – type of multinational operations. The political aims of those activities were primarily: the demonstration of the strength and unity of the Euro-Atlantic community in the fight against terrorism, the elimination of al-Qaeda training bases located in Afghanistan, the replacement of the rule of Islamic fanatics – the Taliban – by authorities subordinated to Washington.²

Due to their complexity and a number of controversies that international operations are concerned with, there is no single generally accepted definition of stabilization operations. In this study, ‘stabilization operations’ will be understood as projects with the use of military-civilian components, undertaken by a state or a coalition of states (not always with the support of the international community) in order to maintain or restore peace and overthrow authorities that do not respect human rights principles in operation (conflict) area.³

The study uses, inter alia, the results of unique research conducted by the author in the zones of war and stabilization in Afghanistan and previously unpublished source documents. The field research was carried out in the area of responsibility of the Polish Task Force stationed in Ghazni province, on a group of 250 participants in ISAF operations in March and April 2009. Moreover, the non-confidential part of the documentation from the activities of individual organizational units of the Polish military contingent was used (for instance: daily, weekly and monthly reports, Polish Military Contingents’ Reports of Rotation). The author also conducted research using the method of participant observation, taking part in patrols (in the area of responsibility of the Polish Task Force in Ghazni province’s districts), meetings with representatives of commands at various levels (Ghazni, Bagram, Kabul), representatives of other national

¹ In Afghanistan, two operations were launched and conducted almost simultaneously. The first was the US-led coalition operation ‘Enduring Freedom’, while the second ISAF was a stabilization operation involving NATO and other countries cooperating with the alliance. See D.S. Kozerański, “Polish Military Contingents in International Peacekeeping and Stabilization Operations between 1973 and 2009”, in H.E. Raugh (ed.), *End of Empires. Challenges to Security and Statehood in Flux. Papers from the 9th Annual Conference of the Euro-Atlantic Conflict Studies Working Group: Bucharest 26-28 May 2009*, Bucharest 2010, pp. 271-276.

² Idem, „Wysiłki międzynarodowe w stabilizacji państwa upadłego na przykładzie Afganistanu w latach 2002-2010”, in R. Kłosowicz, A. Mania (eds), *Problem upadku państw w stosunkach międzynarodowych*, Kraków 2012, p. 241.

³ Idem (ed.), *Działania stabilizacyjne – aspekty strategiczne. Konflikty, interwencje, bezpieczeństwo*, Warszawa 2011, p. 16; idem (ed.), *Działania wojenne, pokojowe i stabilizacyjne prowadzone w warunkach szczególnych w XX i XXI wieku. Konflikty – doświadczenia – bezpieczeństwo*, Toruń 2007, pp. 12-13.

contingents under the ISAF and Enduring Freedom operations, and in meetings with representatives of local authorities and civilians (for instance, at governor of province level). The obtained findings can be used for the preparation and conduct of stabilization operations, to: creation of organizational structures, elaboration of requirements of personal resources' competences, formation of task teams and forces, trainings in national permanent locations and in the zone of military activities, fulfillment of tasks in the area of responsibility of multinational stabilization forces. Moreover, the findings can be used also in the theoretical aspect, during the drawing of strategies and action plans connected with the conduct of international peace and stabilization operations (also the withdrawal from regions of international military activities) in the future.

The terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center in New York was the immediate and fundamental reason for the launching of the military operation code-named 'Enduring Freedom' by the United States supported by an international coalition in Afghanistan.⁴ That operation was launched on October 7, 2001, and a contingent of the Polish Armed Forces participated in it since March 2002. The armed conflict in Afghanistan posed a significant threat to international security for the following reasons:⁵ Afghanistan functioning as a terrorist base; its instability caused tensions in the regions of Western and South Asia, negatively affecting Iraq and Pakistan and also threatening other neighboring countries, for which militant Islam has been a significant problem; the involvement of the international coalition and NATO states in Afghanistan caused significant political and social tensions in these countries; insufficient effectiveness of actions in Afghanistan lowered the authority and credibility of the Alliance and questioned the entire transatlantic security environment, thus creating a favorable situation for forces opposing the international intervention in that country.

It is worth emphasizing that since the start of international operations on the territory of Afghanistan (2001), the personnel of individual contingents have been forced to carry out tasks in extremely difficult conditions in terms of politics, socio-cultural⁶ and ethnic⁷ relations, territorial issues and climate conditions.

⁴ B. Kruszyński, *Udział sił zbrojnych USA w konfliktach w Iraku i Afganistanie – największych wojnach przełomu XX/XXI wieku (na podstawie źródeł i opracowań amerykańskich)*, Poznań 2011, pp. 407-416; J. Kiwerska, *Świat w latach 1989-2004. Wydarzenia – konflikty – procesy*, Poznań 2005, pp. 351-355.

⁵ S. Gall, *War against the Taliban: Why It All Went Wrong in Afghanistan*, London 2012, pp. 67-81; L.G. Irwin, *Disjointed Ways, Disunified Means: Learning from America's Struggle to Build an Afghan Nation*, Carlisle, PA 2012, pp. 40-45; A. Jonas, "Afganistan – zagrożenie dla międzynarodowego bezpieczeństwa", in A. Doraczyńska et al. (eds), *Afganistan – militarny i pozamilitarny wymiar stabilizacji. Materiały z konferencji naukowej zorganizowanej 12 kwietnia 2007 roku*, Warszawa 2007, p. 9.

⁶ The population of Afghanistan is estimated at around 28 million, with a high birth rate – 5%; life expectancy – 43-46 years; 75% illiteracy. The state religion is Islam (about 80% are Sunni, about 19% Shia, and 1% are followers of other religions). See: D.S. Kozerański (ed.), *Operacje pokojowe i antyterrorystyczne w procesie utrzymania bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego w latach 1948-2004*, Toruń 2006, pp. 165-166.

⁷ Afghanistan is inhabited by over 20 ethnic groups of major importance to the multiethnic nation, mainly Iranian peoples: Pashtuns (Afghans) – approx. 42%, Tajiks – approx. 27%, Hazarians – 19%,

The attitude of the local population to the Taliban movement and the actions of the rebels had a significant impact on the security situation of international forces in various areas of Afghanistan. In the northern part of the country, the tribes living there initially provided support to the coalition forces and the troops of the Northern Alliance of Afghanistan, which were fighting with them. In turn, the southern and eastern regions inhabited mostly by Pashtuns, favoring the anti-coalition forces, were high-risk areas.⁸

INVOLVEMENT AND TASKS OF MULTINATIONAL FORCES

In December 2001, pursuant to Resolution no. 1386 of the United Nations Security Council,⁹ NATO established the International Security Assistance Force – ISAF.¹⁰ Its main task was to support the transitional government in Afghanistan and help the North Atlantic Alliance to ensure stability and security in the capital city of Kabul and its province. More important duties assigned to ISAF included: building and training Afghan government structures; organization and training of new Afghan security forces; and assistance in the reconstruction of civilian infrastructure.

On October 13, 2003, the mandate of the ISAF operation was extended on the basis of another resolution of the UN Security Council¹¹ and consisted in extending stabilization activities to more provinces, until responsibility for the territory of the entire country is achieved. During the first three shifts, the operation was commanded by the so-called leading countries (Great Britain, Turkey and Germany). During successive shifts of ISAF, it was commanded by separate forces of regional commands¹², and then by high-readiness corps commands.¹³ In February 2007, a composite command model was introduced in ISAF HQ.¹⁴

It is worth adding that the very process of quantitative expansion of the territorial range of ISAF operations was gradual and related to the division of Afghanistan

Balochs, Naristans and Turkish peoples: Uzbeks – approx. 6%, Turkmen, Kirghiz. Most of the population functions in tribal structures (families, clans). See: *Kompendium postępowania medycznego – Afganistan*, Warszawa 2007, p. 11; *Zabezpieczenie sanitarno-higieniczne – podstawy*, Warszawa 2007, p. 11.

⁸ Such regions include the Ghazni province – the place where the Polish Task Force (PTF) was stationed.

⁹ Resolution of the United Nations Security Council no. 1386 of December 20, 2001.

¹⁰ In the initial phase of the operation at the Afghan Theater of Action, ISAF Forces did not participate in direct offensive operations against the Taliban.

¹¹ Resolution of the UN Security Council no. 1510 of October 13, 2003.

¹² The fourth and fifth shifts were joined by: JFC Brunssum, LCC Heidelberg, JCC Karup.

¹³ With the fourth shift (August 2004) EUROCORPS, the Turkish corps, the Italian corps, and the British corps (until February 2007).

¹⁴ The Command of the Multinational Corps Northeast consisted of over 150 soldiers, including 70 officers from Poland.

into five regions.¹⁵ Since November 2006, ISAF's area of responsibility covered the entire Afghan state, and the conduct of the above-mentioned operation was planned in five phases: 1) deployment of the international forces; 2) extension; 3) stabilization; 4) handing over responsibility to the Afghan authorities; 5) withdrawal of the international forces. In 2012, over 100,000 personnel from over 40 countries participated in the process of stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan (including about 60,000 from the United States and about 2,500 from Poland). The main elements of this multinational environment included: ISAF (NATO) forces and 'Enduring Freedom' forces (coalition of the states); international organizations (governmental and non-governmental), Afghan authorities (central and local); Afghan security forces, religious leaders,¹⁶ local leaders; rebels, Taliban, Al Qaeda; neighboring countries. By the end of 2014, the North Atlantic Alliance put an end to the ISAF stabilization operation, replacing it on January 1, 2015 with the advisory and training mission 'Resolute Support'. The territory of Afghanistan was divided into five advisory and training commands.¹⁷ The main goal of the 'Resolute Support' mission was to uphold Afghan security forces (army, police, secret services), mainly to prepare commands and management structures as well as institutions subordinate to the Ministry of National Defense and Internal Affairs to act autonomously.

The attitude of the local population toward the personnel of 'Enduring Freedom' and 'Resolute Support' operations had a significant impact on the level of security and the effectiveness of the multinational force used by the military-civilian composition. For example, the research conducted among the personnel of the Polish Military Contingent in the Ghazni¹⁸ province showed that only 38% of respondents stated that the impact was positive.¹⁹

That result may be explained, *inter alia*, by significant cultural differences, the traditionally hostile attitude of the local population to 'foreign troops', and effective propaganda activities of the anti-coalition forces.²⁰

Following the U.S. president's decision to withdraw the U.S. contingent from Afghanistan, the North Atlantic Alliance also terminated the operation 'Resolute Support', and its forces left the territory of Afghanistan in mid-2021.

¹⁵ The dates of taking over responsibility for individual regions were closely related to the process of expansion of the coalition forces. The order in which they were taken over was as follows: North Region – taken over on July 1, 2004; West Region – taken over on June 1, 2005; South Region – taken over on August 1, 2006; East Region – taken over on November 5, 2006.

¹⁶ Including those accepted by coalition forces, the so-called war commanders.

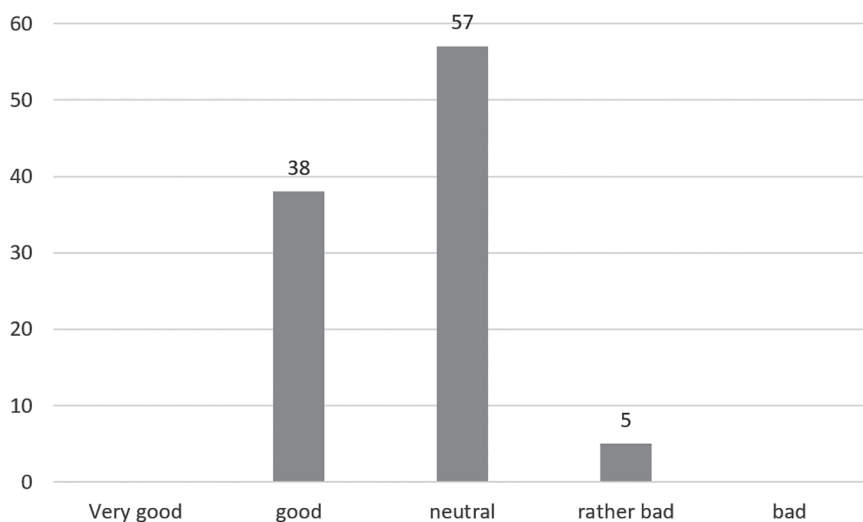
¹⁷ TAAC – Train, Advise, Assist Command.

¹⁸ The respondents answered the question: How do you assess the local population's attitude towards ISAF soldiers?

¹⁹ Based on the author's own research of publications carried out in the Ghazni province (Afghanistan) in March and April 2009.

²⁰ Taking into account the above-mentioned conditions, it was desirable to increase the support of the local population for the so-called 'benevolent neutrality', which in Afghan conditions was neither simple nor short-lived, and as a result had a significant impact on the level of security of the personnel of multinational forces.

Figure 1. The attitude of the local population to the multinational stabilization forces in the area of responsibility of the Polish Task Force in Afghanistan



Source: Own elaboration based on field research carried out in the Ghazni province (Afghanistan) in the period of March-April 2009.

INVOLVEMENT AND TASKS OF THE POLISH MILITARY CONTINGENTS

The character of the activities carried out by the Polish Armed Forces contingents in Afghanistan since 2002 has significantly evolved. Initially, the Polish Military Contingent (PMC) during the operation 'Enduring Freedom' was composed of about 80-100 soldiers. They were stationed in the Bagram base and in the years 2002-2007 they performed the following tasks:²¹ demining urbanized areas and areas adjacent to the airport, cleaning them of unexploded ordnance; destruction of mines, munitions and misfires; marking minefields and mapping roads in minefields; fortification expansion of the coalition forces' camps in the Bagram base; water and fuel distribution in the Bagram base; performing other tasks ordered by the Task Force (TF) 'Dragon' commander.

²¹ After the PMC commenced the implementation of operational tasks in 2007, the component still functioning in Bagram carries out logistic tasks, focusing primarily on ensuring the efficient transfer of Polish forces within ISAF. D.S. Kozerański, "Zmiany charakteru działań kontyngentów Wojska Polskiego w międzynarodowych operacjach stabilizacyjnych w Afganistanie w latach 2002-2009", in J. Maciejewski, M. Bodziany, K. Dojwa (eds), *Grupy dyspozycyjne w obliczu Wielkiej Zmiany. Kulturowe i społeczne aspekty grup dyspozycyjnych społeczeństwa w dobie procesów integracyjnych*, Wrocław 2010, pp. 447-449.

The increased involvement of the Polish Armed Forces and the change in the nature of the tasks performed was the result of the decision of the President of the Republic of Poland of November 22, 2006, pursuant to which 1,200 soldiers and military personnel were sent to Afghanistan. In 2007, those forces constituted individual elements of the PMC and performed tasks in the areas of responsibility of four regional commands (RC):²² Regional Command East – Grouping no. 1 – Polish combat group and operational advisory and liaison team (OMLT);²³ Regional Command North – Group 2 – Mobile Observation Team (MOT)²⁴, part of the Swedish Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT);²⁵ South Regional Command – Special Operations Team; Kabul Regional Headquarters – Grouping no. 3 with Polish representatives in ISAF headquarters.²⁶

Additional elements were maintained in the following bases: Kabul, Bagram, Sharan, Waza Khwa, Ghazni, Gardez, Kandahar, Mazar-e-Sharif. The main component of the PMC was the Polish Manouever Battalion (with two Polish Manoeuver Companies and one American) performing tasks from three bases – Sharan, Waza Khwa, Ghazni.

Since October 2008 a change in the location of individual elements of the PMC took place in the Afghan theater of operations. The Polish Armed Forces contingent (approximately 1,400 people) – in order to concentrate forces and resources, as well as to increase the effectiveness of its activities – took over responsibility for the Ghazni province. The main tasks of the Polish task force (PES) in the Ghazni province were the following:²⁷ ensuring security and public order in its area of responsibility; demining and removal of war damage; protection of important infrastructure, culture, weapons and ammunition depots; assistance in establishing local authorities and supporting the administration; assistance in creating and training the Afghan army and other disposable groups (police, border guards); implementation of projects for the benefit of the local population; providing humanitarian aid. In the following years, the size of the Polish contingent was gradually increased (in 2012 it accounted for about 2,600 people).

²² Z. Śliwa, “Wojsko Polskie – udział w afgańskiej prewencji”, in A. Doraczyńska et al. (eds), *Afganistan – militarny i pozamilitarny wymiar stabilizacji*, Warszawa 2007, pp. 77-78.

²³ OMLT – Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team.

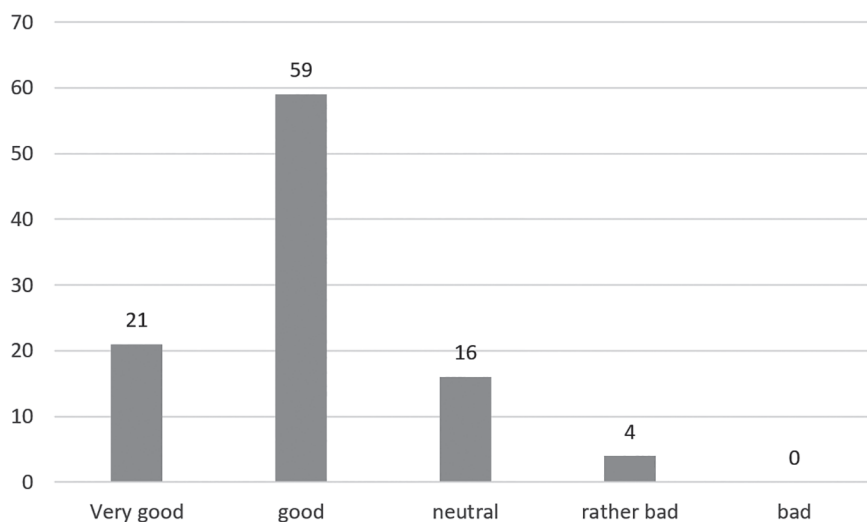
²⁴ OMT – Mobile Observation Team.

²⁵ PRT – Provincial Reconstruction Team.

²⁶ The ISAF command consisted of the following Polish elements: a group of advisers to the Minister of Defense of Afghanistan, a group of the deputy commander of the coalition command for training the Afghan army.

²⁷ B. Tworowski, *Polskie kontyngenty wojskowe w Afganistanie na przykładzie 6. Brygady Powietrznodesantowej w ramach XI zmiany PKW. Doświadczenia i wnioski*, Kraków 2021, pp. 67-68; D.S. Kozerawski, “Kontyngenty Wojska Polskiego w międzynarodowych operacjach pokojowych i stabilizacyjnych prowadzonych pod przywództwem Stanów Zjednoczonych”, *Athenaeum. Polskie Studia Politologiczne*, vol. 70, no. 2 (2021), pp. 49-50; M. Rozmus (ed.), *Żandarmeria Wojskowa (Policja Wojskowa) w ramach misji Międzynarodowych Sił Wsparcia Bezpieczeństwa w Afganistanie*, Mińsk Mazowiecki–Warszawa 2014, pp. 9-11.

Figure 2. Assessment of the cooperation of the Polish Task Force personnel with soldiers from other countries participating in the stabilization operations in Afghanistan



Source: Own elaboration based on a field research carried out in the Ghazni province (Afghanistan) in the period of March-April 2009.

The analysis of the chart above shows that 70% of respondents positively assessed the cooperation with military personnel of other countries as part of ISAF and 'Enduring Freedom' operations. Such an opinion could result from the fact that the Polish brigade functioned in an efficiently commanded structure of the American forces and the personal experiences of the soldiers of the Polish contingent, for whom this was another participation in a multinational stabilization operation.²⁸

A special emphasis was placed on the so-called non-kinetic activities that were carried out, among others, by the Civil-Military Cooperation Group (CIMIC). The most important of those activities included: meetings with local and tribal authorities; implementation by PRT and CIMIC of aid projects for the local population (based on funds obtained from various sources of financing, mostly from the CERP²⁹ and US-AID, as well as under the Polish foreign aid program managed by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs); organizing humanitarian aid; collecting and updating data in the area of responsibility of the Polish Task Force.

One can argue – based on the afore-mentioned analysis – that the nature of the tasks performed by the components of the PMC changed along with the quantitative increase in the involvement of the Polish Armed Forces in stabilization activities in Afghanistan. The changes in the nature of the operations of the Polish Armed Forces

²⁸ Own elaboration based on field carried out in the Ghazni province (Afghanistan) in the period of March-April 2009.

²⁹ CERP – Commander's Emergency Response Program.

contingents in the stabilization operations in Afghanistan in 2002-2014 took place in the following stages:³⁰

- I. Performing logistic tasks – since 2002 in the Bagram base.
- II. Commencement of the implementation of operational tasks – since 2007 within the ISAF forces (provinces: Ghazni, Wardak, Logar, Paktika).
- III. Continuation of operational tasks (since 2008 as part of the ISAF forces in the Ghazni province).
- IV. Handing over responsibility for the province to the Afghan authorities.
- V. Withdrawal of the Polish military contingent from the theater of stabilization operations.

In 2015, the Polish military contingent began performing tasks under the NATO 'Resolute Support' advisory and training operations. The sub-unit operating in the Bagram base, with the strength of 200-400 soldiers and civilian personnel, carried out advisory and training tasks in the years 2015-2021. In June 2021, the personnel of the Polish Military Contingent ended their mission and left Afghanistan.

AFGHANISTAN – 'CONTROLLED BANKRUPTCY/INSOLVENCY'

It should be emphasized that during the multinational operations on the territory of Afghanistan, that country was characterized by the typical features of a failed (or failing) state including: internal conflicts / armed struggles; lack of central government control over the entire territory of the state; failure to ensure public order; influence/participation of radical forces, criminal structures in making decisions in the state concerning political, economic and social life; functioning in the territory of the country of bases, shelters, training camps of extremist movements or terrorist organizations; the inability of the central government to ensure the functioning of the state in terms of finances (administration, public safety, health care, education, social benefits, etc.).

The specificity of Afghanistan's insolvency included, inter alia, such external factors as: the invasion of a coalition of states under the 'Enduring Freedom' operation; attempts to introduce democracy and a free market by force, under pressure from the troops of the international coalition – without the understanding and support of the majority of the local population; weakened relations with Pakistan; effectiveness of foreign support for opium production; waning support for ISAF operations, as well as 'Enduring Freedom' and 'Resolute Support' missions; no possibility of wider involvement of non-governmental organizations due to the low level of security in the region.³¹

The insolvency of Afghanistan was also significantly determined by internal factors, including: the weakness of Hamid Karzai's rule and the lack of a broad public support;

³⁰ D.S. Kozerański, "Theory versus Realism – The Use of the Soviet Strategy and the Antiterrorism Coalition Strategy in the 1979-2012 in Afghanistan Wars", in H.E. Raugh (ed.), *Past through Present: Thoughts on Military History at the Strategic, Operational and Tactical Levels of War*, Wien 2013, p. 230.

³¹ For more information see: idem, "Wysiłki międzynarodowe w stabilizacji państwa...", p. 245.

full dependence of the Afghan government on the USA; the lack of a real support from a significant part of local leaders; the allegation about the government's cooperation with the 'invaders'; enormous stratification and differentiation of society; corruption in the Afghan administration at various levels; collaboration with the so-called war commanders (warlords).

Moreover, Afghanistan's insolvency was shaped by socio-cultural factors, such as: cultural and social diversity; the tradition of the fight against invaders; the custom of carrying weapons; the tradition of fighting in defense of the Islamic faith (jihad); low level of the civilizational development;³² high level of illiteracy; high level of unemployment; corruption and inefficiency of state disposable groups (army, police, prison service).³³

The following activities of the international forces had a significant impact on the consolidation and even deepening of the insolvency of the Afghan state: the ineffective strategy in 2001-2009 ('combating rebels') – changed into a 'strategy for the protection of civilians'; limited military successes – inability to fully control the entire territory of the state;³⁴ limited success of CIMIC and PRT activities; aversion to strangers; intimidation by rebels; questionable purposefulness of help; real decrease in the level of security; increasing the scale and effectiveness of anti-coalition activities; the so-called military mistakes of coalition forces. The situation of multinational forces in Afghanistan and the problems with maintaining control over the occupied territories, as well as the strategic scale of this phenomenon, were quite vividly illustrated in a statement by Lt. Gen. Michael S. Tucker, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations of the ISAF: *We are in such a situation that we can easily drive out enemies [...] or anyone else, but we are not able to hold the conquered territories. And that's the problem.*³⁵

THE WITHDRAWAL OF MULTINATIONAL FORCES

The strategic exit from the Afghan theater of operations was supposed to be symbolic, but the reality turned out to be different. The Iraqi scenario was not repeated, either, because in Iraq in 2011 the withdrawal of US troops was carried out as planned, although far from being peaceful. In Afghanistan, the Taliban first seized the strategic initiative in the theater of operations, then swiftly seized Kabul and took over state power. This seems to have caught the politicians of many Western nations by surprise.

The intention to carry out the withdrawal of the mission in Afghanistan calmly under the American leadership simply failed. The United States had a very detailed, deep

³² They mainly concerned: infrastructure, administration, education, health care and transport.

³³ For more information see: *ibid.*

³⁴ For example, in 2009 the international forces had exceptionally high own losses caused by the use of improvised explosives by the rebels.

³⁵ U. Fittner, "The West Stares into the Abyss", *Der Spiegel*, 20 March 2009, at <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/afghanistan-on-the-brink-the-west-stares-into-the-abyss-a-614555.html>, 20 September 2022.

knowledge of the situation in the country. It should be recalled, however, that the failure of the operation in Afghanistan occurred in 2014, when the ISAF and the NATO missions ended, and the main U.S. operational forces withdrew from Afghanistan. The subsequent operation 'Resolute Support' for several years was to show that the West, the Americans and NATO did not flee Afghanistan, that their forces supported the Afghan government in consultation, advice and training. However, several thousand soldiers who remained in the area of hostilities had no longer a significant influence on the gradually deteriorating state of security in that country.

It was also evident that the Afghan security forces of over 200,000 people were a kind of illusion when acting in the area designated by the Western forces. That was confirmed by the events in the phase of the withdrawal of the coalition troops, when the Afghan government units either went over to the Taliban lines, or was sidetracked and did not undertake combat activities. Such a situation resulted, inter alia, from incomprehension of local socio-cultural conditions by Western decision-making bodies. It used to happen that in a Pashtun family several sons fought on the rebel side, and one or two served in the Afghan army. The clan and tribal structure was not properly understood by Europeans. Experienced Afghan leaders knew that one day the Americans and NATO troops would leave the country. They considered the deployment of the coalition forces as a temporary situation from the very beginning. On the other hand, they treated the formation of Afghan kandaks,³⁶ i.e. battalions of the government army, as a rearming of their own tribes or clans.

Americans and their NATO allies did not read those cultural and social codes properly. For example, coalition force officers responsible for the training of the Afghan army did not ensure that the staff of individual units were mixed in terms of ethnicity and clanship. The way of selecting their commanders was similar. A situation occurred in which a clan or a tribe exerted an influence over the command of the entire unit, which was a clear proof that internal rather than coalition interests were pursued.

It is worth noticing that while the West was trying to help Afghanistan, it did not understand what this country was about. It was impossible to introduce democracy without a viable strategy in the political dimension while using force at the same time. Some military projects for Afghanistan were put forward, better or worse, such as General Stanley McChrystal's concept of mission in Afghanistan. It was implemented by President Obama in 2009 who sent an additional 30,000 troops to there. However, those tens of thousands of soldiers were not able to restore security throughout the country.

The coalition forces never dominated the entire Afghanistan. For example, in the Polish stabilization zone in the Ghazni province, the Nawa district was an uncontrolled area, always marked in gray on the military maps. Nobody ventured there, and if so, only for a short time, which was the result of the lack of control over this area.

³⁶ Kandak [afg.] – a sub-unit in the strength of the battalion.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR AFGHANISTAN – A 'FUNDAMENTAL INSOLVENCY'?

After the withdrawal of the multinational forces from the territory of Afghanistan in 2021 ('Resolute Support' in June, and the U.S. forces in August), the country faced numerous challenges, such as: the withdrawal of the U.S., NATO and coalition forces from the territory of the country; foreign policy of the Taliban government; the relations with Pakistan; the relations with other neighboring countries; the attitude of the new authorities to the production of drugs (opium); the economic development strategy – trade in natural resources; the attitude of the West towards the new Afghan authorities – on the state and international levels; radicalism of the Taliban rule – in political, social and religious dimensions; the lack of financial independence – reliance on radical Middle Eastern diasporas and on revenues from drug production; return to the principles of the religious state – Islamic fundamentalism; the status of women in society; enormous stratification and differentiation of society; corruption in the government at various levels; problematic support from local leaders.

The military challenges which Afghanistan has faced after the withdrawal of the multinational forces from its territory also deserve special emphasis, namely: the building of new disposable groups in the country (army, police, border guards, prison service, special services); cultural and social diversity (national, ethnic, clan) of the new disposable groups; low level of organizational and technical culture (infrastructure, administration, education, healthcare, transport); the seizure of significant military assets from the Afghan military and police forces of the previous regime; the possibility of using Western training and operational procedures; shifts in the regional balance of power.

The withdrawal of the multinational forces from the territory of Afghanistan after two decades and the handing the country over to the radical Islamic group have generated many questions about its future. Among the numerous forecast scenarios for the future developments in Afghanistan, this study presents three: optimistic, realistic and pessimistic.

In general terms, the optimistic scenario entails the implementation by the Taliban authorities of a series of moral, political and economic reforms referring to the respect of fundamental human rights concerning all citizens (especially women). The following steps should be considered as particularly desirable: the introduction of an educational reform allowing to reduce the level of illiteracy, professional activation of women and the strengthening of their social role, a better access to health care (especially in rural provinces), reduction of the unemployment, and a more effective fight against drug trafficking. However, due to the exceptionally conservative and radical attitudes toward such scope of the reforms on the part of the current authorities in Kabul, this scenario should be considered to be unlikely.

On the other hand, the forecast relating to the realistic scenario could include such initiative and undertakings of those in power as: the return to a religious state based

on Islamic radicalism; Afghanistan's growing dependence on radical Middle East diasporas; the use of the captured military assets to intimidate weaker neighbors militarily; an economic development strategy based on trade in raw materials and natural resources, support for the production and trafficking of drugs; the increasing scale of corruption in state administration at various levels; non-compliance with human rights; limitation of women's rights; blood feuds and persecution of political opponents – the use of terror by the authorities against political and religious opponents in the next few years.

One cannot exclude a pessimistic scenario in this forecast, either. Taking into account the actions related to the realistic scenario presented above, it may additionally boil down to Afghanistan's involvement in the global conflict with infidels, which would result, among others, in: the setting up of training camps for radical religious organizations; planning and carrying out terrorist attacks in various regions of the world, providing support for anti-Western radical forces in the local, regional and global dimensions.

By all means, it is worth taking into account an option that the radical Islamic fighters ruling Afghanistan will undertake various types of actions presented in each of the above presented scenarios, wanting on the one hand to establish relations with actors outside the region, and, on the other hand, striving to fully subordinate all inhabitants of Afghanistan in accordance with the principles of religious fundamentalism.

CONCLUSIONS

It should be stated that Afghanistan had been a failed state before the invasion of the coalition forces, during the multinational operations, and at present. It was widely considered as a subject in the policy of the United States and its allies. The lack of self-reliant decision making by the puppet authorities of Afghanistan, corruption at all levels of the state administration, low level of support for the government and its Western principals in the provinces among local leaders, ethnic communities and tribes and, above all, the increasing effectiveness of anti-coalition operations by the rebels – were the main causes of failure of the international efforts to restore stability which ultimately forced the coalition forces to withdraw from Afghanistan.

The strategic withdrawal of the international forces did not suddenly make Afghanistan a stable and predictable actor in Central and South Asia. One of the main reasons is the adoption of inappropriate strategies by the international forces during their intervention. In the process of stabilizing the situation, the focus was primarily on combating the rebels, and the specific social and cultural conditions of Afghanistan were not fully taken into account.

The lack of a considerable improvement of the humanitarian situation was an important factor determining the ineffectiveness of the stabilization efforts and the negative attitude of the local population toward the coalition forces. The main sources of that state of affairs include: the lack of security of the personnel of international

humanitarian organizations; discrepancy between the limited amount of funds for aid and humanitarian projects and the unlimited scale of needs; incorrect diagnosis of the needs of the local population; failure to take into account socio-cultural determinants and limitations.

At present, after the withdrawal of the Western forces from Afghanistan, the country is ruled by the radical Taliban. However, one should not take in good faith any of the declarations which the Emirate of Afghanistan would make with regard to humanitarian issues. The Taliban are trying to mislead the international community by claiming that women will be allowed to go to work, and girls to attend school. These declarations are dictated merely by the desire to create a better impression that the Taliban state could function as an actor in international relations. Meanwhile, the regime crushed dissent and repressed its opponents, and the scale of atrocities was enormous. It is not known what is happening in the provinces because there is no free and independent media there.

Another international anti-Taliban coalition has not been formed. Nobody can be persuaded to return to Afghanistan to fight there. The international community will not take up such a challenge. The West is aware that it made a huge strategic mistake by attempting to force democracy in a country where the vast majority of its population did not expect the armed intervention and was hostile to foreign forces invading their homeland.

The crucial question seems to be wide open: Will the West be able to draw constructive conclusions from the experience of unsuccessful interventions in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, so that in the future, when wanting to help, simply it will do no harm...?

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Prof. Col. (ret.) Dariusz Kozerański, Ph.D. – full professor of Jagiellonian University in Kraków (Institute of Political Sciences and International Relations), former Rector-Commandant of National Defence University and Vice-Rector of the NDU for Military Affairs and International Cooperation (2013-2016); Head of the Chair of Strategy and Geostrategy (2008-2013), Head of the Chair of European Affairs (2006-2007). He earned the title of professor in humanities sciences in the University of Wrocław (2013). His area of expertise are: international security, military history, conflict studies and security strategy. He is an author and co-author of over 200 publications in Poland and abroad. He is a member of Euro-Atlantic Conflict Studies Working Group of the PfP Consortium of Defence Academies and Security Studies Institutes, the Friends of Military History Society, Society of Polish Geopolitics. He realized fieldworks in zones of war, stabilization and humanitarian activities (Bosnia and Herzegovina 1998-1999, 2006; Moldavia – 2006; Iraq 2008, 2014; Afghanistan 2009, 2012; Kosovo – 2012, Jordan 2013, 2015). In 2010 and 2012 he led the international seminars in European Parliament in Luxemburg connected with international security. In years 2010-2012 he participated on the works of the Strategic Review National Security led under the auspices of the President Republic of Poland. In 2014 he was the head of NATO DEEP team in Iraq. He has a title of veteran of international peace support operation.